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## The Root of the Problem: Mississippi and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Matthew Brennan Hendley  
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THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM  
Mississippi and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

By: Matthew Brennan Hendley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2020

Approved By

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Dedication Page:

To journalists in Mississippi and beyond who have bravely given voice to the social issues of our day, especially for those concerning race and equality.

*“The system is broken, schools closed, prisons open.”*

- *Kanye West*

*“He who opens a school door closes a prison.”*

- *Victor Hugo*

*“For these are all our children, we will profit by or pay for what they become.”*

- *James Baldwin*

### Acknowledgements:

All glory and honor be to God, who uniquely created each of us, who gives us an opportunity to fight for the oppressed and those who can't fight for themselves.

Thanks to the brave souls who fight for social justice, especially for the futures of our youth.

Thanks to my parents, for raising me to be a man of character, for their constant support, and for paying for stuff.

Thanks to Dr. Imre, for guiding me throughout the thesis.

Thanks Dr. Wenger and Dr. Smith for their insight, and to all those who have formed me as a reporter over the years.

Thanks to the School of Journalism and New Media, for showing me that journalism is important and can help institute real change.

ABSTRACT:

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM: MISSISSIPPI AND THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

(Under the direction of Dr. Iveta Imre)

*The Root of the Problem: Mississippi and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* is a solutions journalism piece about the “schoolhouse to jailhouse” theory, which represents a phenomenon in which grade school students, the majority of which are minority youth, are funneled into the criminal justice system via schools through policies and procedures that criminalize student misbehavior. The piece is an in-depth analysis of the arrival, history, and current state of the school-to-prison pipeline in Mississippi, featuring one specific effort to dismantle the phenomenon in the Sunflower County Consolidated School District in the Mississippi Delta. In addition to this analysis, the piece explores not only the players involved in the advancement of the school-to-prison pipeline, but the root causes well.

Website URL (under construction): <https://msschooltoprison.wordpress.com>

## Table of Contents:

Title Page.....	1
Copyright Page.....	2
Dedication Page.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Abstract.....	5
Table of Contents.....	6
Preface.....	7-12
Literature Review.....	13-17
Writing Process.....	18-20
Glossary.....	21-22
Article.....	23-36
Conclusion/Discussion.....	37-40
Appendices.....	41-44
Bibliography.....	45-47

## Preface:

In 2020, I was selected along with 35 other collegiate journalists to be a part of a nationwide investigation into the juvenile justice system in America with Carnegie-Knight News 21, an investigative fellowship with the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. During the eight month fellowship, our team investigated several aspects of the juvenile justice system such as facility conditions, racial disparities, employee abuse, etc., as well as key pathways that lead kids into the juvenile justice system such as “junior gangs,” and, of course, the school-to-prison pipeline. This research and reporting resulted in “Kids Imprisoned,” a multimedia project that included more than 30 articles and virtual documentaries, photos, and a multi-episode podcast detailing our findings.

Having been born and raised in Madison, one of the few parts of Mississippi that could fit the demographic of “middle class white suburbia,” the school-to-prison nexus was a foreign concept to me when I first read about it in early 2020. I was homeschooled until the eighth grade, attended public school for two years, and then spent my final three years of high school at a Catholic school just across the street from our public high school. The Catholic school I attended had a teacher to student ratio of 8-to-1 and a 98 percent graduation rate, and was all but a sure path to higher education and a successful career (though the student-to-teacher ratio was significantly less superior to the 1-to-1 ratio when my mother was teacher, principal, judge and jury). I really had few other plans when the journalism



department at the University of Mississippi came calling to ensure I'd be a great fit for the program after seeing my high school portfolio.

At UM, my reporting had touched on topics involving race and racial disparity, but *Kids Imprisoned* planted me further inside the tragic reality of an unjust and unequal juvenile justice system than I ever thought I would be.

Though I was raised in an environment starkly contrasted to the places I would be covering with News 21, race and inequality has always sparked emotions of compassion and intrigue, and higher education opened a door to pursue a dark narrative that was occurring in my own backyard, though I had been well-trained to push issues of race and inequality out of focus and toward the back of my mind. My very first class project at the University of Mississippi was an animated explainer video on the “new plantation,” or how the overemphasis of the American sports culture hinders the development of Black student-athletes, often forcing young Black students to rely too heavily on athletic pursuits as their only means of upward mobility. In my junior year, I enrolled in a class called “The South and Race” within the Southern Studies department at UM. This furthered my interest in the history of race relations in Mississippi, and introduced me to the work of various Mississippi journalists whose reporting influenced the state’s progress during the Civil Rights Era and beyond. After reading the work of Ida B. Wells, a Holly Springs native and anti-lynching advocate, I was so inspired and moved by her passion and pursuit of shining the light of truth upon the darkness engulfing our state that I initiated an effort, along with a friend and classmate Brittany Brown, to rename our journalism school after Ms. Ida B. Wells. Though

the effort was halted due to unforeseen circumstances, the knowledge I gained from having studied and written about her work was something I will always cherish. The effort sparked a friendship between Michelle Duster, Ida B. Wells great-granddaughter, and myself, and led me into conversations with various former and current civil rights activists, current and former UM students, and various members of the extended UM community in Mississippi and across the country, garnering national support for the movement from various locations.

Needless to say, the investigation with News 21 covered topics that I had been unknowingly preparing for my entire collegiate career, and my thesis is the culmination of my interest in reporting on class and race-related issues. Having collected so much information over the 8-month span of reporting on racial disparities involving minority youth across the country, I had settled on the fact that my senior thesis for the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College would extend in some way from my reporting with News 21. Around late August of 2020, I came across a short infographic on the website of the Mississippi Center for Justice, a public interest law firm committed to advancing social and economic justice, that mentioned a project within a wing of the Center for Justice that aimed at dismantling the “schoolhouse-to-jailhouse” pipeline in Sunflower County, MS. I instantly knew the term, but had no idea where Sunflower County was. I quickly turned on “reporter mode” and hopped on the phone with representatives of the Mississippi Center for Justice to pry for more information.

After talking with Beth Orlansky, the Advocacy Director at the Mississippi Center for Justice, I was introduced to the Sunflower County Systems Change Project, a

project within the Mississippi Center for Justice aimed at ending the school-to-prison pipeline within the Sunflower County Consolidated School District, whose headquarters is in Indianola, MS, two hours southwest of Oxford. What drew me into the Systems Change Project was its ingenuity. I had heard of similar efforts in other parts of the country, but nothing even remotely similar in Mississippi. Systems Change's efforts and methods lined up perfectly with what I had discovered through News 21, which is that the school-to-prison pipeline is advanced by the three main institutions involved: the school system, the criminal justice system, and the media. Decades of zero-tolerance policies and school codes within school districts creates direct and indirect links from the classroom to the courthouse through in-school arrests, court referrals, suspensions and expulsions that either allow students to come in contact with the criminal justice system or increase the likelihood of that occurrence. Mass media has been partially responsible for the branding of Black youth as troublemakers, which has influenced a growing narrative surrounding young Black men that the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree, or rather, that young men of color will continue the cycle of generational incarceration that plagues many Black families.

A key element to Systems Change and the broader movement to reform the juvenile system is the implementation of restorative justice practices. With News 21, I came across the work of Steven Teske, Chief Judge of the Clayton County Juvenile Court in Clayton County, Ga. I was initially intrigued by his "Second Chance" initiative, which focused on keeping even youth who commit felonies out of the criminal justice system by placing them in a rigorous, 18-month

restorative justice-based and behavioral treatment program. After talking with Teske, I discovered that Second Chance was only the “deep end” of the pool, and that he had, in fact, reshaped the way the entire juvenile justice system operated in Clayton County. No matter what crime a child committed, there was always a way out through alternative programs that focused on elements of restorative justice techniques such as behavioral therapy and mediation between families, victims and offenders.

This was restorative justice in action. I chose to include Teske’s insight and example in *The Root of the Problem* due to his substantial reputation in juvenile justice reform and because, as you will read, the youth court in Sunflower County offered little support in the Systems Change effort.

What resulted from this research is an in-depth solutions journalism article on the school-to-prison pipeline in Mississippi, with a focus on and evaluation of the Systems Change Project in Sunflower County, Mississippi. The article is housed on it’s own Wordpress site, [msschooltoprison.wordpress.com](http://msschooltoprison.wordpress.com), which includes various multimedia elements such as photos, data graphics, and short videos from various interview subjects.

Following this preface, this body of work will contain an introduction into the history of the school-to-prison pipeline and insight into what the root causes of the problem actually are. The thesis will provide details on my writing process strategy for interviews, a glossary of definitions of key words mentioned or

referenced in the article, and then the article itself will tell the narrative of the school-to-prison pipeline in Mississippi. Finally, the conclusion will discuss how this article fits the solutions journalism model and invite readers to consider this method as a key element in increasing the impact of the work of journalists in the realm of social justice in the future.

## Literature Review

Research reveals that the school-to-prison pipeline began in the 1980's with the advent of the Reagan administration's "tough on crime" stance. The number of kids becoming involved in the justice system spiked further with the arrival of the Gun Free Act of 1994 and the ensuing "zero-tolerance" policies in schools that could get a student expelled or referred to court for even minor infractions. In the last thirty years, the prison population in the United States tripled, naturally filtering in students in the midst of a growing punitive justice system, and the vast majority of the victims are young Black students.

Black students, both male and female, are exceptionally vulnerable to being caught in the school-to-prison pipeline due to the socio-economic circumstances that the majority of Black students are educated in, which are often underfunded school districts that are heavily policed with no justice alternative other than punitive measures.

The racial disparity in the juvenile justice system has decreased since 2000 due to the inception of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in 1988, who has made substantial efforts to decrease the racial gap and find ways to prevent youth entering the criminal justice system all together. However, the statistics are still daunting: Black students have an arrest rate of 28 per 10,000, which is three times that of white students, and are more likely to be suspended, expelled, and referred than their white peers, according to the [ACLU](#). One [study](#)

even shows that Black males who never finish high school have a 70 percent chance of going to prison by their mid-thirties.

In Mississippi, the school-to-prison pipeline was scarcely discussed and routinely ignored until 2010, when the City of Meridian and the Mississippi Department of Youth Services became the subject of a class-action federal lawsuit that accused the district of advancing the school-to-prison pipeline and violating fourth, fifth, and 14th amendment rights against the children attending those public schools, according to reporting from [TIME](#) magazine:

“For six years or so, at least 77 children, some as young as 10 – all of them “children of color,” says Jody Owens, with the Southern Poverty Law Center – were routinely arrested at Meridian schools allegedly on the say-so of teachers or administrators, handcuffed and taken to jail where they were held for days on end without benefit of a hearing, a lawyer, or understanding their Miranda rights. Their parents or guardians weren’t notified of the arrests until the children were in lockdown in a facility the SPLC says was a hellhole of abuse and neglect.”

The Meridian School District shortly thereafter made an agreement to amend school rules that had allowed police to be called for minor infractions such as wearing the wrong color of clothing to school, and made efforts to put an end to in-school arrests, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions that disproportionately affected minority students. The City of Meridian has since moved to exit the lawsuit after having complied to the DOJ’s request, according to

reporting from the [Meridian Star](#) in 2019. Three hours northwest of Meridian, a similar, yet-lesser known school-to-prison link was beginning to take form.

Sunflower County, though not the worst pipeline the state has seen, was not unscathed by the phenomenon, as the majority of youth court referrals were coming from the school district for several years. But the district likely would have been overlooked if it were not for Kimberly Merchant and the presence of the Mississippi Center for Justice in Indianola. Having worked in civil litigation and as the assistant district attorney in Sunflower County, Merchant was well aware of the issue. Merchant helped thrust the plan into action in 2015 with the support of the Kellogg Foundation. It takes a village to make systems change, and the ground happened to be fertile in Sunflower County.

A portion of the project was a program called the R.O.O.T.S initiative, which stands for “Reclaiming Our Origins Through Storytelling.” Young Black men from various schools in Sunflower County who were viewed as leaders were selected to attend a summer long “StoryCamp.” The young men were given a space to express themselves through poetry, song, and dance, and were offered the opportunity to learn about their community through sharing experiences with each other as well as interviewing local members and elders of the community.

Kyle Pernell, who was a 17-year-old at the time, remarked about R.O.O.T.S.:

“This project gives hope to the hopeless, sight to those who are blind to their capabilities, smell to those who can’t smell their destiny, and freedom to those who have been bound by poverty, shackled by oppression, and chained by low



esteem. I've become more confident in who I am, aware of my abilities, and certain of my future through this program.”

This reveals a piece of the puzzle that is often missing from reform efforts across an array of initiatives: the building up of the person. As a society, we are quick to call for the tearing down of institutions and policies, but we are oftentimes unwilling to search the depths to find *what* is actually oppressing *whom* and *why*. At the heart of the Systems Change Project, I have discovered, is about reclaiming an identity. The true identity of young Black men in Sunflower County had been stripped away and sucked into a narrative that reduced these children to a statistic. The purpose of R.O.O.T.S. was to counteract that narrative.

Yes, policies and practices that are explicitly and implicitly racist needed to be reformed, and a collaboration from various institutions involved was critical to making systems change.

But those are obvious stepping stones that can be initiated by adults. A critical step that is often overlooked is an investment in those whom these reforms will have an effect on. Data links between policy and racial disparity only tell half the story. During my research for News 21 on kids in gangs and in my research for Systems Change, it was remarkable to find out how many “troubled youth” come from single-parent homes, with a father incarcerated, a mother hooked on drugs, or no biological family altogether. It was remarkable to hear the stories of children who began to sell narcotics before hitting double digits, all in order to put food on the table. And it was remarkable to hear how many of these youth were sent to

institutions that only deepened these criminal tendencies and neglected the possibility of rectification.

In this article, I want to get across to readers how *detrimental* these circumstances can be to a young person. As soon as a child is introduced into the criminal justice system, they are already more likely to reoffend. Even for low-level youth offenders, time spent in incarceration increases the likelihood of reoffending, according to the [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#). It is because of these dire circumstances that punitive measures on children will not work. If policy reform regarding school-aged children is never met with behavioral intervention, systemic change will never occur. Systems are changed, one member of the project told me, when mindsets are changed.

Journalists are experts at identifying problems. But a main flaw within our workforce (and far from the only flaw) is our inability to offer solutions to those problems. The purpose of this piece is to uncover and highlight people and programs that pursue the foundational causes of the school-to-prison pipeline and work to correct the futures of those affected.

## Writing Process

My approach to writing this article was based in a genre of reporting called solutions journalism, which is a form of storytelling that focuses on responses to social problems. A solutions journalism piece, according to the [Solutions Journalism Network](#), must contain these four criteria:

1. A focus on a response to a social problem, including *how* and *why* that response has or hasn't worked.
2. Offers insights and examples that makes the response relevant and accessible to others.
3. Looks for evidence of data or qualitative results that show effectiveness (or lack thereof).
4. Reveals limitations and shortcomings of the response.

In *The Root of the Problem*, I focus on the response to the school-to-prison pipeline in Sunflower County and evaluate the effectiveness of that response in a manner that is reflective of proper objective journalistic techniques and ethical frameworks.

*More on how the piece is solutions journalism on page 26, below the article.*

Initially, I collected information from News 21's investigation into the school-to-prison pipeline, saving useful public data from various sources, including the ACLU and the Department of Justice. Once I had settled on Systems Change as the main focus of the article, I began gathering data reports and secondary information from the Systems Change Project and reports from Mississippi more broadly.

Excluding conversations with News 21 subjects, I conducted interviews with eight people in a span of six months between October 5th, 2020 and March 18th, 2021. Each interview was conducted either by phone or via Zoom with an initial time limit of one hour, though two of these interviews lasted beyond an hour. The interviews occurred as follows:

#### Interview Subjects:

Beth Orlansky, Advocacy Director, MS Center for Justice – Phone Call

Steven Teske, Chief Judge, Clayton County Juvenile Court – Zoom

Yumekia Jones, Legal Assistant, MS Center for Justice (Indianola) – Zoom

Jawaski Gardner, former R.O.O.T.S. participant – Zoom

Kyle Pernell, former R.O.O.T.S. participant – Zoom

Kimberly Merchant, former Systems Change director – Zoom

William Murphy, Director of Student Affairs, SCCSD – Zoom

Amir Whitaker, ACLU of Southern California – Zoom

For several interviews, follow up information and resources were collected via email.

## Glossary

**School-to-prison pipeline:** The national phenomenon in which school age children, the majority of which are minority youth, are funneled into the criminal justice system directly and indirectly through both educational inequality and overly harsh school policies.

**Juvenile Justice System:** The system used to handle adolescents who engage in criminal behavior.

**Racial disparity:** A significant difference between the representation of a specific racial group in the general population and their representation at a particular point in the justice process (e.g. in-school arrests).

**Systemic change:** A result of the theory that change must occur within organized subsets of a system in order to effect the behavior of the entire system.

**Young men and boys of color:** (YMBOC) as referenced by the Systems Change Project, meaning school-aged Black males. In this article, the terms young men of color, Black youth, Black students, and youth of color are used interchangeably.

**Zero-tolerance:** A form of disciplinary policy that categorizes large swaths of offenses and pre-determines the type of punitive action, which is typically severe, that will be taken against the offender (i.e. expulsion, court referral, out of school suspension).

**Disciplinary Codes:** Existing rules that guide disciplinary action within schools, typically listed in student handbooks.

**Restorative Justice:** An approach to justice that seeks to repair harm done to victims and facilitate an offender's rectification.

**Punitive Justice:** An approach to justice that seeks to punish the offender through deprivation or restriction.

**Explicit Bias:** Intentional and conscious attitude of prejudice toward a particular group of people.

**Implicit Bias:** An act of prejudice without intention, or an act that indirectly results in discrimination.

**Segregation Academies:** Post-desegregation private schools founded in the mid 20th century by white parents in order to keep their children from attending schools with Black children.

**SROs (School Resource Officers):** Federally funded police officers within schools whose duty is to protect and carry out discipline of the student body. They have the power to arrest, respond to calls, and document infractions.

## The Article

### **The root of the problem: Mississippi and the school-to-prison pipeline**

*The school-to-prison pipeline is a national phenomenon in which students are funneled from public schools into the criminal justice system. Both in-school arrests and decades of “zero-tolerance” policies that criminalize minor infractions of school codes have contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline. Young men and boys of color (YMBOC) are disproportionately affected.*

Mississippi once again found itself at the forefront of the conversation involving race inequality.

In 2012, the Meridian School District made national headlines when it became the target of a class-action federal lawsuit that accused the city of advancing the school-to-prison pipeline.

Reports began unfolding: as many as 77 children, all children of color, were reportedly arrested for violating minor school rules, taken to jail, and locked up for several days. Headlines labeled it [“the worst school-to-prison pipeline”](#) to date, and it had been going on for years.

But Meridian was hardly the first, or the last. The following school year, [data](#) collected from school districts across the country confirmed the trend: The number of student arrests involving school districts in Mississippi continued to increase, and two-thirds of students receiving school-based arrests were Black, the fourth worst disparity in this category among states behind Alabama, Louisiana and Georgia.

Stuck in the tangled pipeline were school districts such as the one in Sunflower County, MS – a school system located in a low-income area with a high Black student population – two characteristics that, unfortunately, make a community susceptible to the school-to-prison pipeline.

In 2016, the Sunflower County Consolidated School District was evidence of a broken system. In the previous school year, 93% of kids referred to youth court were coming directly from the school district, often for minor infractions such as “disturbing a school session.”

Seventy-one percent of those kids were young Black males, according to data from Sunflower County’s Administrative Office of the Courts.



“Anytime they couldn't find a criminal charge for these children, they would charge it under this offense,” said Kimberly Merchant, who was Director of the Mississippi Center for Justice’s Educational Opportunities Campaign at the time.

“So it was just like this catch all, even if it wasn't criminal,” she said.

Sunflower County sits in the middle of the Delta, 40 miles east of the Mississippi River. The northern portion of the county is home to the infamous Parchman Farm, the state’s only maximum security prison.

The county has 14 schools and a 74 percent Black population, a popular post-Civil War point of migration for thousands of African-Americans desperate for work. Indianola, the county seat, is where the Sunflower County Consolidated School District is headquartered.

After *Brown v. Board*, the 1954 landmark U.S. Supreme Court case which ruled school segregation unconstitutional, Sunflower County fell into the pattern of forming “segregation academies” by opening Indianola Academy in 1965. The school opened its doors as a way to legally keep white students separate from black students, while remaining “equal.”

Even today, the student body at Indianola Academy is more than [90 percent white](#).

As years progressed, public schools in Sunflower County have been chronically underfunded and low-performing, along with the majority of predominantly Black school districts. In 2015-16, the school district received a “D” rating from the [Mississippi Department of Education](#).

Many believe the inferiority of the public schools stems from the draining of resources brought about by white residents fleeing to segregation academies, leaving black students to suffer from a lack of local support and developed leadership, according to Sunflower County community members interviewed in [an article from The Atlantic](#).

“White supremacy is the root of the school-to-prison pipeline,” said William Murphy, the district discipline coordinator for Sunflower County Schools. “We can dig all day, but you’ve got to go back to the systems that were created from the start.”

This county, much like the rest of the Delta follows the national trend. Black youth are suspended, expelled, referred and arrested by law enforcement at a rate of nearly 3 times that of white youth.

“Oftentimes in African-American communities, there's this notion that something like that can't exist,” said Murphy. “To have that notion is to completely ignore the effects of racism, and how even those who look like you can end up oppressing you,” he said.

## **HISTORY**

Before joining the Mississippi Center for Justice, Kim Merchant was the assistant district attorney in Sunflower County and had spent 15 years practicing civil litigation and criminal law.

She had first-hand experience with how the court system had been shaping the futures of young Black males in the community.

“There was a pattern of young men of color being sort of funneled through the youth court system in Sunflower County, especially as a consequence of school,” Merchant said. “It was something I had been wanting to address on a systemic level for some time, but just did not have the time or really space to do it.”

And those systemic changes needed to be made in Sunflower County immediately – with various institutions involved, including the school district, the youth court system, and the media.

“It was really about making sure all of these institutions understood how one interacted with the other that really created this storm,” she said, “Which was the perfect storm for funneling these young men into the criminal justice system.”

Merchant teamed up with Jennifer Riley-Collins, former executive director of the ACLU of Mississippi, and took a team to visit the Miami-Dade County public school district in Miami, Fla. – which is considered to be a model for school districts attempting to implement restorative justice principles into school disciplinary codes.

In a ten year span, Miami-Dade Public Schools saw [decreases in suspensions and increases in graduation rates](#) after eliminating zero-tolerance policies, establishing support systems and launching suspension alternatives where students receive behavioral therapy while being still required to complete schoolwork.

“That sort of investment demonstrates why they have the results that they have,” Merchant said.

Upon returning from Miami, Merchant and company gathered what could logically be replicated in Sunflower County and got to work.

## **SYSTEMS CHANGE**

Merchant sent a project proposal to the Kellogg Foundation, who awarded the project a \$1 million grant. And with that, the Sunflower County Systems Change Project was born – a grassroots effort to tackle the school-to-prison pipeline and alter the perception of “young men and boys of color” (YMBOC) in Sunflower County.

The project hit the ground running in 2016 under the wing of the Mississippi Center for Justice, a public interest law firm “committed to advancing racial and economic justice,” according to their [website](#). Teams were established to research how the school district had been handling disciplinary cases and what fundamental practices needed to be changed.

One of the proposed changes involved disciplinary codes. In the 2015-16 school year, Black students across the nation received out-of-school suspension at four times a greater rate than white students, according to a [study from Princeton University](#). This occurs despite the [finding](#) from the Civil Rights Commission that “evidence does not show that students of color or students of color with disabilities misbehave more frequently or severely than other students.”

In that same year, Mississippi had the second highest suspension rate in the nation, according to [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) from the U.S. Department of Education.

In 2017, a “Systems Change” [study](#) of five schools in Sunflower County revealed that young Black males were disproportionately cited for infractions, accounting for 75 percent of infractions despite being only half of the student population.

“If they were kicked out of class or something, that doesn’t mean that they have to be suspended for three days,” said Yumekia Jones, who works as a special projects manager for the MS Center for Justice’s Indianola office.

As a part of the Sunflower County Systems Change Project an advisory council was formed in order to change disciplinary codes that contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline, stemming from a load of concerned calls from parents reporting that students were being suspended or expelled for minor infractions.

Keeping students in class is key, Jones said, as statistics show that truancy is often a stepping-stone to delinquency.

“[Changing disciplinary codes] was a way to try to keep people in school and try to find other methods that educators could use to implement discipline without it being punitive,” Jones said.

But within the thicket of those daunting statistics was a glimmer of hope.

### **R.O.O.T.S. Program**

Another goal of the Sunflower County Systems Change Project was to change the perspective of how young men of color are perceived in a community. The project introduced ROOTS (Reclaiming Origins Through Storytelling) program in Sunflower County, a summer-long initiative created specifically for young men of color.

Jawaski Gardner was 15 years old when he entered the 2016 ROOTS program. In the heat of the Delta summer, Gardner and 19 other high school-aged young men of color, all from various high schools in the county, gathered together for StoryCamp. Here, the young men were tasked with interviewing elders and community members about their lives, discussing and sharing their own stories about how negative stereotypes of young Black men affect their lives.

“It really changed my whole life,” Gardner said. “It made me look at life totally different.”

The program aimed to give young Black men new insight about the cultural and historical aspects of their community, and in turn allow the community to “see

these young men listening and caring – to see them as diverse, talented and respect worthy; as allies in the ongoing quest to rebuild a thriving Sunflower County,” according to [the ROOTS data report](#).

Gardner had seen peers fall into trouble at school and then the law, subsequently continuing the school-to-prison pipeline that plagues many Black communities, something Gardner believes is caused by a lack of intentional guidance on behalf of community leaders.

“It goes from being on drugs to selling drugs to being in prison,” he said. “If they had somebody that would have pushed them to success, sit them down and talk to them, let them hear their voice, things would be different.”

Gardner said that the path toward incarceration is advanced by the lack of support from parents and teachers in public schools.

“They don’t support our dreams,” Gardner said. “I believe if we can get young men and young women in a room and say, tell me what you want to do, and when you want to do it, we’ll see them advancing in things that they thought they would not have been able to do themselves.”

But with the Sunflower County Systems Change Project, the breach in the relationship between Black youth and the local community was being filled.

## **OTHER CHANGES**

By the end of 2017, the Systems Change project was seeing real, tangible progress.

Beyond ROOTS, the Systems Change project began to crack down on disciplinary processes in the school district. In-school infractions in November of 2017 were documented at nearly nine times a greater rate than in November of 2015, signaling a greater commitment from school administrators to the tracking and transparency of disciplinary actions taken against students.

The Systems Change study also indicated that there were more student and parent-teacher conferences as Systems Change took effect, while suspensions remained “relatively stable” over the course of the year.

The “project team” within the Systems Change Project also worked delicately with School Resource Officers (SROs) to provide them with education involving efforts to “deescalate a situation” as opposed to arresting a student, given that the student had committed a minor infraction.

## **SCHOOL DISCIPLINE**

After the Gun Free Act of 1994, zero tolerance policies swept across the nation, the number of police in elementary and high school hallways increased, and more students saw the inside of courtrooms and jail cells than ever before.

In Sunflower County, making changes to the school rules that were ushered in by zero- tolerance policies were imperative, since a number of infractions that could send a youth toward referral included things like cutting in the lunch line, not having a white undershirt or improper hair style.

“Systems Change gave us the momentum to really get into the discipline and begin to chunk some things that had zero-tolerance language,” Murphy said. “It helped us start to streamline how we do things in the district.”

Systems Change partnered with an independent company out of Louisiana to train staff in restorative justice, which is a theory of justice that repairs the harm caused by criminal behavior through reconciliation between victims, offenders, and members of the community.

Restorative justice is the antithesis of the zero-tolerance approach, and is especially critical in Black communities, Murphy said, where systems were designed to be “zero-tolerance” from the start, often allowing unjust consequences to befall children of color and contributing to racial disparities.

“These systems do very little to repair and rebuild the person,” Murphy said. “All we have seen are punitive measures that are similar to baseball, 3 strikes and you are out. School has to be the place where restoration and reconciliation happen.”

At age 21, Murphy moved to Greeneville, MS, to work as an elementary school principal. After half a decade in education, he began to recognize the harm of disciplinary systems that were solely punitive.

“Restorative practices put the onus on adults to treat students with respect, but also to hear their voices as well,” he said. “Even larger than that, restorative practices allow relationships to be repaired and restored, and individuals to be re-integrated into communities and not cast out.”

Many argue, however, that restorative justice practices are more difficult to carry out due to the reliance on behavioral services that are often underfunded. In many cases, schools rely on SROs for disciplinary action, since school police are funded through grants from the federal government.

In most states though, including Mississippi, SROs are not required to receive any additional training that involves dealing with children in schools.

Systems Change acknowledged the role SROs have played in pushing kids out of school and into the criminal justice system. In response, the project initiated an “SRO Professional Development” program that trained Sunflower County SROs specifically in efforts to de-escalate a school disturbance without using threats of arrest, detention, or suspension.

In a [post-survey](#) of the program, 86 percent of SROs involved in the training said the program provided greater clarity for what their role should be in handling matters at the school building, and 100 percent of participants agreed that other SROs would benefit from the training.

Murphy acknowledged, however, that the program was more of an introductory training, and that SROs would have benefitted from further training on character education.

“This was a solid start,” Murphy said. “The difficulty for resource officers is that they are under the direction and supervision of the building level principal, so even if you have a restoratively trained officer, it means little without a restoratively trained leader.”

Most school police though, including the ones in Sunflower County, have backgrounds in community policing, and are well-formed in handling people and situations from a criminal justice approach.

This makes restorative justice implementation an even greater challenge, Murphy said.

“They likely would need even more training than educators in order to turn off the ‘switch’ that exists from their previous training and their experiences,” he said.

But other school districts across the country are rethinking SROs completely after several [studies](#) actually indicate that the presence of police does not make schools safer. In fact, advocates often argue that SROs are a main catalyst to the advancement of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Before working with the ACLU of Southern California, Amir Whitaker saw the pipeline in action while representing children in Mississippi and Alabama with the Southern Poverty Law Center. He said that although student misconduct often results from unaddressed mental or behavioral issues, many schools rely on SROs for discipline since they are ill-equipped with other alternatives.

“They weren't social workers or therapists or school psychologists to respond to the behavioral needs,” Whitaker said, “And the easiest thing to do was to call the police or to just push the kid out of school.”

Mississippi has the [third highest](#) rate of incarcerated people per capita, which Whitaker believes is a result from a lack of investment in education.

“We have to view education as prevention,” he said. “Any doctor will tell you it's easier to prevent diabetes by exercising. It's a lot more expensive to treat it once you have it.”

In 2020, the ACLU released “Cops and No Counselors,” a [report](#) highlighting the fact that 14 million students across the country attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker.

“The system itself is set up in a way that does not support children and meet their needs,” said Whitaker, who co-authored the report from the ACLU.

In the midst of the current global mental-health crisis, Sunflower County has struggled to meet those needs. Mississippi itself has a student-to-counselor ratio of 1 counselor per 432 students, well above the 1-to-250 recommended ratio from the American School Counselor Association.

In Sunflower County, there is one counselor for each of the 14 schools in the district, a 1-to-300 student to counselor ratio. But Murphy said the shortage of just counselors is not the problem.



“The reality is that the job of the counselor has so many other elements to it that take them away from students,” he said.

What the district needs, Murphy said, is more school therapists, behavioral specialists and social workers whose sole job is to respond and meet the social and emotional needs of students.

“This could free up the school counselor to effectively implement whole-school counseling programs with fidelity,” he said.

The district, according to Murphy, plans on funding more social workers next year with concern over the mental health of children brought on by the pandemic.

“Having such individuals who are specifically trained in areas of mental health and behavior could allow for students and families getting the specific support that they need,” he said.

## **THE COURT SYSTEM**

While the Systems Change project was celebrating some real successes while in operation, not everything was running smoothly. Only six months after the Systems Change Project was launched, the Sunflower County Youth Court suddenly pulled their support.

“They just ignored us,” Merchant said. “They wouldn't return our calls, wouldn't respond to emails, wouldn't come to meetings.”

This circumstance surrounding the court's sudden withdrawal was not a complete surprise to Merchant, however. At the time, Black representation in positions of power in Sunflower County was little to none.

“We were unapologetic in being honest about the discrimination and racism that exists in the system, and I don't think the youth court judge took that kindly,” Merchant said.

In order to implement systemic change, Merchant said, the youth court was an institution that needed to be a part of the reformation process. But she knew that if

the school district remained on board, the project could at least fight to limit the number of kids who appeared inside the courtroom at all.

“In turn, we still had attorneys lined up to represent these young men,” she said. “So it was like, OK, you don’t have to return our calls, but we’re coming into this court and we’re challenging [the system].”

Across Mississippi and in many communities across the United States, school and court systems still have a blistered and unholy marriage.

In the early 2000s, a youth court judge in Clayton County, GA., noticed a youth court trend similar to the one in Sunflower County: a third of all delinquent offenses came directly from the school system, the majority of which were for minor infractions. Suspensions were on the rise, and subsequently, juvenile crime as well.

“If you over-suspend a student, they’re going to quit,” said Chief Judge Steven Teske. “The same goes with arresting a student. Just one arrest of a kid will double the chances of this kid dropping out of school.”

Teske fights the school-to-prison pipeline from the other side of the ball at the Juvenile Court in Clayton County, a diverse county located in the south metro area of Atlanta.

He is widely considered as one of the top experts on juvenile justice in America and is known for having completely revamped the court system in Clayton County. The “Clayton County Model”, often referred to as the “Teske Model”, resulted in a dramatic 70 percent decrease in school referrals to juvenile court from 2003 to 2010. Since then, youth commitments to the criminal justice system are also down 90 percent.

Under Teske’s School Justice Partnership model, which was officially started in 2004, no misdemeanor is allowed to be handed over to a prosecutor’s office. The data, Teske said, show that kids who enter the court system are automatically more likely to re-offend.

“What the research informs us is that most kids are going to age out of their delinquency,” Teske said. “So that means we want to make sure we don't introduce them to delinquency.”

Instead, Teske's model focuses on behavioral treatment for common in-school infractions such as fighting, class disruption, and disorderly conduct. Rather than court referral, student offenders are given a warning and required to attend behavioral and conflict resolution workshops.

For students who continue to cause trouble, the child and the family of the child are required to attend regular meetings in order to connect them with therapeutic and behavioral services.

As a result, referrals and suspensions are down, and graduation rates are up. In the 2019-20 school year, graduation rates increased by nearly four percent, yet another increase for each year the School to Justice Partnership has been in effect.

"That's the effect of not putting them in the system," Teske said. "Where you see the school partnership taking effect, you begin to see not only a decline in school offenses, but you begin to see an increase in graduation rates as well."

Teske's court system is designed with various programs that act as "release valves" to prevent kids from ever entering the criminal justice system. He even has a program designed specifically for youth who commit felonies.

Even if a kid is categorized as "high-risk," they may be eligible for the Second Chance Program, dedicated to youth who commit felonies, which saves the state between 19 and 32.2 million dollars per year by keeping them out of prison.

The best approach is to take a long look at the data, Teske said. In Clayton County, arrests had increased by 1,400 percent, yet 92 percent of those were misdemeanors.

"They had nothing to do with public safety," he said. "If you send me the wrong kids, what you do becomes my business, and no one wants me to become their social proctologist. It can get messy."

Reforming the court system is a critical component in changing systems, Teske, said.

"The juvenile court judge will be the first to recognize the school-to-prison pipeline and its horrible effects on kids," Teske said.

“It makes sense for the juvenile court to become the champion to reform because his or her court is the intersection and has the best vantage point to bring all these stakeholders together to lead the conversation around reform.”

## **RESULTS**

While the project saw tangible results, ultimately the funding ran out.

“After the third year, Kellogg had a shift and for whatever reason, did not continue to fund the project,” Merchant said.

Kellogg’s removal of funding after the third year put a hole in the plan, according to Merchant, who said the project was supposed to be long-term from the beginning.

“One of the things we said and the one thing we kept repeating was that we were going to need at least five years because, well, everything that we were trying to do in this project required time,” Merchant said.

Although the Systems Change team continued to try to do the best they could with what they had, Kellogg’s pull of support limited the projected results of the project.

“One of the things I believe is that it was not implemented long enough,” Jones said, “So that we could really get a baseline measurement on the impact that the changes to the code of conduct can take.”

And after three and a half years, Merchant left the project to work at the Shriver Center on Poverty Law.

“The idea was to set [Systems Change] in place and for it to continue without us,” she said. “So we had to keep people in places to help make it work, but so much transition – and that’s the problem with systems changing in these spaces.”

Today, Murphy still works for the Sunflower County Consolidated School District. He’s made sure that the changes made to the disciplinary codes are still enforced, and is watching Sunflower County improve each year.

“When we started this thing, we actually were failing,” Murphy said. “Now we are successful, and are one of the few successful districts in the Mississippi Delta.”

The school district in Sunflower County is now a “C” rated district, which fits criteria for a successful school district, according to the state’s accountability model.

“I believe the lasting effect of the systems change program has been a mindset change for the leaders charged with making decisions that affect the entire district and the communities served,” Murphy said.

Ending the school-to-prison pipeline starts within existing institutions, Murphy said, and the changes brought about by the Systems Change Project are visible efforts to fight the phenomenon.

“Our existing code of conduct is a byproduct of the Systems Change Project. Our existing Dress Code Policy is a byproduct of the Systems Change Project. Our handbooks and systems for reporting discipline data are byproducts of the Systems Change Project. Even more importantly, our desires to continue improving in these areas have been largely influenced by the Systems Change experience,” he said.

Ultimately, Sunflower County is a success story in many ways. The shift toward a restorative justice approach to discipline that is fair and equal for kids and adults from all socio-economic backgrounds begins with a shift in mindset, advocates argue.

“We are better today than we were 5 years ago, and we will be better in 5 years than we are today,” Murphy said.

## Conclusion/Discussion

In conclusion, I will briefly discuss how the different elements of this article fit the criteria of solutions journalism, beginning with the four points:

1. *A focus on a response to a social problem, including how and why that response has or hasn't worked.*

In accordance with the rules of solutions journalism, the article opens with the context of the problem that is being addressed, which, in this case, is the school-to-prison pipeline. The narrative is carried further by discussion of the difficulty in solving this problem. The tension in this piece between the problem and the solution is the difficulty of reforming the various institutions involved in advancing the school-to-prison pipeline. In documenting the causes of this problem, which include segregation, zero-tolerance policies, broken community relationships and so forth, the piece sets the stage for solutions that can counteract those circumstances.

2. *Offers insights and examples that makes the response relevant and accessible to others.*

Rather than basing insights in opinion or third-party research, the article takes an approach of introducing the Systems Change Project, a program designated solely for the purpose of addressing the problem (school-to-prison pipeline) in the location of discussion (Mississippi). Through the presentation of

the Systems Change Project, the reader is given evidence of change that is supported by characters who speak to the response. This offers insight on what a response could look like if it were to be replicated.

3. *Looks for evidence of data or qualitative results that show effectiveness (or lack thereof).*

Solutions pieces are transparent with readers about the evidence, where it qualifies as success and where it qualifies as failure. In this article, data is presented from the Systems Change Project that reveals the effectiveness of the altered disciplinary policies. The piece also presents qualitative data about the R.O.O.T.S. program, which is a response to the aspect of the problem that requires intervention on a personal level. The article is transparent about the lack of longevity of the project and the absence of necessary components to reform (such as the cooperation of the court system). In response to this lack, the piece highlights programs outside of the Systems Change Project that found success in these areas (i.e. Teske model), and offers insight from additional outside sources who can provide suggested alternatives.

4. *Reveals limitations and shortcomings of the response.*

Since there is no perfect response to a social problem, a solutions story reveals the shortcomings of a particular attempt to address a problem. Rather than

reporting from a place of authority of the subject, this piece allows representatives from the Systems Change Project to evaluate the shortcomings of the project themselves. In this, team members of Systems Change highlight the difficulty of implementing such reforms in a state such as Mississippi and the external factors that went into the loss of funding for the project. These limitations are included in parallel with the prospect of a change in social mindset that occurs when there is an attempt to shift toward restorative justice.

In addition to this story being published through the University and housed on its own Wordpress site, I plan to submit this story to the Solutions Journalism Network for the organization to use and place in their archives. I also plan to pitch the piece to Mississippi Today and Mississippi Public Broadcasting, who are known for their incredible work in the realm of social justice reporting.

After reading this article, I highly encourage readers to look into the work of the Solutions Journalism Network and other organizations that follow this method of journalism. I consider this model of journalism to be increasingly important in this post-truth age, where empirical evidence is often ignored and solutions to problems seldom discussed. As social problems become more complex, often their solutions take more effort to implement amongst a number of competing opinions. Solutions journalism is a way for the media industry to use effective reporting and research techniques to supplement the fight to provide fairness and equality for all. Our nation and our democracy needs the press, and the people need the press to perform at a progressive standard, lest it becomes another



institution that divides and continues to contribute to narratives that sustain oppressive phenomena such as the school-to-prison pipeline.

## Appendices

Each interview was conducted as a natural conversation, but questions were formed based on the four solutions journalism criteria. Below is an example of the question list that was used and adapted to cater to each interview:

1. **Response** – Ex: School Justice Partnership, an alternative route to juvenile detention or prison. What is the program? What do they do? Where do they live?

Who gets in?

- What is the program?
  
- Describe the process of when a kid is referred to Youth Court and the subsequent steps.
  
- What inspired you to reform the court system?
  
- What does a day in the life of a kid in the program look like?
  
- How do you select who is a fit for the program and who is not?

- Once kids are in the program, what approach is taken?
  
- How does the program decriminalize youth?
  
- How are teachers selected for the program?
  
- How many teachers are in the program and what are their responsibilities?
  
- Who else is on staff?
  
- Future of the program?

**2. Evidence** – Ex. This program has a low recidivism rate. Graduation rate? Success rate? Teacher in the program who sees day-to-day activities? What's interesting about the program? Unique?

- How has the program reduced the number of court referrals/in-school arrests/suspension?
  
- What is the success rate for the program?

- How many kids have gone on to lead productive lives?
- What is the recidivism rate?
- What day-to-day activities have proven to be successful?

**3. Insight** – Trial and error. What works, what doesn't? What can other courts and communities learn?

- What works best in the program?
- What was tried that did not work?
- What is central to the program that other places can learn from?

**4. Limitations** – Ex. It's not for everyone. It doesn't solve the problem for everyone. Can it be replicated on a broader scale?

- What limitations does the program face?

- How do you select who gets in and who doesn't?

- Does it solve the problem for all kids, or only those who are willing to change?

- Can this program be replicated on a broader scale?

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