

## Smoking Guns or Smoke & Mirrors?: Schools and the Policing of Latino Boys

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One October morning in 2009, as one of the authors of this article, Mario Galicia, was driving to a local high school where we were collecting field notes, surveys, and interviews for a larger research project following gang-associated youths across institutional settings,<sup>47</sup> he received a phone call from Richard,<sup>48</sup> the gang-intervention program coordinator for the youths whom we were studying. Richard asked Mario to meet him across the street in a supermarket parking lot, instead of the usual meeting place on campus. He exclaimed, “The campus has been placed on lockdown!” Upon arriving, Mario noticed that the shopping center parking lot, adjacent to the high school, was filled with dozens of middle-aged white adults, mostly females in mini-vans and a handful in luxury sedans. Two local television news vehicles were also at the scene. Most of the people in the parking lot looked distraught as they stared towards the school. One of the white women was crying hysterically as she talked on the phone. “I think there is a shooter in the school...I don’t know what to do!” She was the mother of one of the students at the school.

As Mario approached Richard, he overheard another mother addressing a news station reporter. She described witnessing an earlier incident involving a group of boys getting into an altercation outside of the supermarket. “He pulled something out that looked like a gun and pretended to shoot at the other boys, but I did not hear any gunshots. That’s when I decided to tell the school.” Richard explained to Mario that, shortly thereafter, the school was placed on lockdown and a group of about twenty local police and sheriffs scoured the campus for the boy involved in the incident. Richard pointed towards the school where a cluster of about eight SWAT team officers, all dressed in black and wearing helmets, moved in unison along the side of the school, and then went in, combing through hallways and classrooms. An hour into the incident, four sheriffs walked out of the school with a group of four Latino male boys, ages 15-16. The boys all had shaved heads or short buzz haircuts. They wore baggy pants or long shorts with extra-long white socks. Two of them wore Pendleton style dress shirts. All of them wore black and blue. The boys kept their heads down, apparently in shame, as they were escorted into patrol cars. Law enforcement officers cleared the school, allowing parents to pick up their children. As she returned to her vehicle, one of the white mothers blurted out, “I’m so glad they are taking those gangsters away. I hope they rot in jail!” The boys later reported that they were held for six hours, without food or water, when they were interrogated.

After the incident, we interviewed two of the four boys, Ruben and Vince, and then held a focus group with all four boys. After this, we informally interviewed other students that witnessed the event. From this data and media reports, we developed an account of the incident. The four youths, Ruben, Cairo, Mike, and Vince,<sup>49</sup> had been gathered across the street from their high school at a super market. They had all met up prior to the start of classes to purchase snacks and beverages for school that day. Shortly after purchasing their soft drinks and potato chips, the boys were approached by two young men driving a vehicle.

They told us, “fuck you lames, we’ll get out of the car and beat your asses to the ground.” We all laughed. They got pissed off and then acted like they were gonna’ get out of the car...That’s when we grabbed whatever we could grab.

The white mother that witnessed the boys “grabbing whatever they could grab,” panicked when she saw the boys in a conflict and apparently witnessed seeing a gun. She ran to the school to report the gun sighting to high school administrators. The school immediately reported the incident to local law enforcement and put the school’s students, staff, and administrators on lockdown until the investigation was over. Shortly thereafter, all of the schools’ entrances and exits were blocked by local law enforcement, as were the adjacent traffic

47. Rios, V.M. (Forthcoming) *Missing Fire: Gangs Across Institutional Settings*. University of Chicago Press.

48. The name of the intervention program coordinator has been changed in order to maintain his confidentiality.

49. The names of the youths in this paper have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

intersections. As parents were escorted away from the school to the supermarket parking lot located across the street, they were briefed by other witnesses as to what had occurred to cause the lockdown. Most of the witnesses, who were informing other parents about the events that led to the trouble, had heard the story from someone else. The account escalated into a narrative of gun-slanging, gang-banging thugs who were ready to shoot at each other. Two parents were overheard talking, "...they were gang members, who got in a fight before school, that started this mess..." and the other parent replied, "...they all had guns and then ran towards the school..."

By the end of the day, after extensive investigation and interrogation, police announced to the school, parents, and the media that none of the boys involved in the incident ever displayed a gun. Parents had somehow confused a *water bottle* that one of the boys pulled out as a gun. Ruben explained:

Nah man, it was me. I was scared and I had a water bottle in my pocket. So I pretended to have like a knife on me and reached in my pocket, and as the guys drove off, I pulled it out to make fun of them being scared of something as simple as a stupid water bottle.

This misinformation and hysteria delivered by parents to other parents, the school, media, and social media exemplifies how, in an era of mass incarceration, schools, law enforcement, and community members perceive and interact with young Black and Latino boys as culprits and suspects, even before any concrete evidence arises against them (Rios, 2011). We found, in this particular incident, and, in the larger four-year ethnographic project from which this case study was derived, Latino boys at this school were often labeled, stigmatized, and criminalized. We define criminalization as the process by which individuals are denied the opportunity to prove their innocence and legality, within a context where institutions such as law enforcement and schools exacerbate punishment in an attempt to regulate and control racialized and poor populations (Cacho, 2012; Rios, 2011). Criminalization exists within a process that Diego Vigil (2002) describes as "multiple marginality." Multiple Marginality theory examines the various micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level factors that create and construct youngsters as gang members. Vigil finds that constantly changing political, social, economic, and psychological processes in society must be accounted for in analytical approaches. Who is considered a gang member today might be different than a decade ago, and the social control imposed on gang-associated populations might also differ, depending on larger cultural and political economic forces. The criminalization of Latino boys as gang threats has become exacerbated during the current era of mass incarceration, "school-to-prison pipelines," and the increase of Latino immigrant populations throughout the United States. The xenophobia follows. Multiple marginality can help us explain how the boys in this study became constructed as criminal threats in the multiple contexts and institutions in which these boys navigated.

## From Learning to Labor to Preparing for Prison

The United States has now reached a point where an average of 600 juveniles are arrested each day, and where every black boy born in 2001 has a one-in-three chance of going to prison, while a Latino boy, born in the same year, has a one-in-six chance of facing the same fate (Campaign, 2008). Research dating back to the work of David Tyack (1974) argues that mass education ultimately fails to provide working-class students with the credentials necessary to experience upward social mobility, and, instead, operates to reproduce the very class inequalities that it purports to ameliorate (Althusser, 1971; Anyon, 1981; Anyon, 1997; Anyon, 2005; Bourdieu & Nice, 1984; Freire, 2000; Willis, 1981).<sup>50</sup> Thus, this body of work provides a critical framework for

50. Paul Willis, in *Learning to Labour*, provides a thorough discussion of the literature on mass education. Willis begins his discussion with John Dewey, an American philosopher and an early major proponent of the social reform potential provided by mass education. John Dewey argued that education could serve as a means to provide "members of the underclasses, especially black and Hispanics" access to "better jobs and a higher standard of living" (Willis, 1981:127). However, implicit in Paul Willis's ethnography is his engagement with John Dewey and his vision of upward social mobility delivered through education. Willis duly notes, through his analysis of working-class, young British males, that this is a rhetoric that obfuscates the reality of a class-based society because "the whole nature of Western capitalism is also such that classes are structured and persistent so that even relatively high rates of individual mobility make no difference to the existence or position of the working class... no conceivable number of certificates among the working class will make for a class society" (Willis 1981:127).

understanding the school as a site of stratified social reproduction. Yet, much of this research took for granted the terrain of public education in a redistributive state where manufacturing jobs were the next logical step for many of the youths they studied. However, as the prior bodies of work show, the redistributive state has been largely eradicated, (with public education being one of its remaining vestiges), in the aftermath of post-industrialization and deindustrialization manufacturing jobs, which working-class children were overtly and subtly prepared to do. The jobs no longer exist, and prisons have become the places where people left unemployed by deindustrialization will likely find themselves.

In light of capitalist globalization, many critical-education scholars and youth advocates use the term, “school-to-prison pipeline,” in order to encapsulate the processes that continue to inequitably classify youth along racialized class lines through mass education, and then pipeline them into the growing prison-industrial complex. Literature on the punitive turn in public education helps us to identify watershed moments in history—such as the shifts in funding away from education and toward incarceration that occurred throughout the 1990s (Campaign, 2008; Connolly et al., 1996; Gold, 1995; Taqi-Eddin, Macallair, & Schiraldi, 1998), and the moral panics, through the mid-to-late 1990s, based on a string of violent school shootings at suburban and rural high schools (Binns & Markow, 1999; Brooks, Schiraldi, & Zeidenberg, 2000; Donohue et al., 1998; Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; Dycus, 2008; Mukherjee & Karpatkin, 2007) that facilitated punitive investments into public education. This research also helps to identify the specific “objective features” of these punitive investments—in the form of zero-tolerance policies, school-resources officers (SROs), surveillance technologies, and information-sharing linkages between the education system and the criminal justice system—as well as the impacts they have had on rising rates of suspensions and expulsions, drop-out (or “force-out”) rates, and school-based arrests.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, within academic literature, there has been a debate emerging in recent years over the impacts of these punitive investments into schools, on these institutions themselves, and on the trajectories of students in mass education. The “convergence” camp asserts that the impulse to heavily invest punitive resources into schools has reached not only schools in poor communities but also in middle-class, suburban, and rural schools, so that all schools share the similar contours of a securitized terrain—which includes, for example, cameras; full-time, school-based police officers; zero-tolerance policies; and normalized law enforcement responses to otherwise non-criminal issues (Kupchik, 2009). This camp argues that the dissemination of this institutional surveillance regime will reproduce, on the one hand, a criminalized class that serves to justify the securitization of social trends, and, on the other hand, a compliant class accustomed to surveillance techniques and technologies; the presence of law enforcement personnel in daily life; and a law-enforcement response to non-criminal issues (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006).

Pointing to the class variation in the vehicles through which administrators and teachers manifest these punitive investments, (i.e., in middle-class schools with drug-sniffing dogs and school-based police officers, who see themselves as mentors first, and as officers second, and, in schools largely composed of working-class students of color, all of whom are subjected to humiliating and aggressive metal-detector programs and mandatory pat-downs by condescending police officers), Paul Hirschfield (2008) asserts that there are key differences in how poor schools are securitized, “[I]n short, the gated community may be a more apt metaphor to describe the security transformation of affluent schools, while the prison metaphor better suits that of inner-city schools” (2008b:84). In the latter form of school, administrators, educators, and SROs can label youths of color as “animals,” “inmates,” or “killers,” and they can also project criminal futures onto their students, as well as lead their students to believe that their teachers don’t support them or care about their success (Blum & Woodlee, 2001; Ferguson, 2000; Fine et al., 2004; Noguera, 2003; Nolan & Anyon, 2004).

## **Policing the (Latino Youth) “Gang Crisis”**

Working-class Latino youth commonly experience negative educational encounters, intensified by punitive school policies and adversarial treatment by teachers, which tend to lead some of these youngsters to

51. Allen et al., 2004; Ambrosio and Schiraldi, 1997; Bonczar, 2003; Bowditch, 1993; Brooks et al., 2000; Campaign, 2008; Cantu, 2000; Connolly et al., 1996; Dycus 2008; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Figlio, 2006; Fine, 1986; Harlow, 2003; Mukherjee and Karpatkin, 2007; Noguera, 1995; Noguera, 1994; Sanders, 2000; Skiba, 2000; Skiba and Rausch, 2006; Stoneman, 2002.

being pushed out of school altogether (Conchas & Vigil, 2010). In our study, we found that the school played a significant role in facilitating the criminal-justice-system processing of many of the boys we studied. Many boys, in particular, were identified as gang threats by school officials and, as such, were reported to police officers. Parents were advised about the “gang crisis” by school officials. This, in turn, created paranoia among parents. Parents pushed law enforcement to crack down on (Latino) gang members. Law enforcement focused more of their resources on this targeted population. The ultimate outcome was a state of hyper-surveillance and hyper-criminalization where young Latino boys became scrutinized and punished for common adolescent behavior such as group bonding, loitering, arguing, and experimenting with rule-breaking. Discipline for these kinds of transgressions was now handed over to police by institutions—school, the family, community programs—that, traditionally, would have intervened in these minor offenses. Since schools have the power to package, construct, label, and deem students as troublemakers and offenders, they often become a launching pad from which young people are catapulted into the criminal justice system. Schools have the power to determine the life-course outcomes of marginalized young people. When schools involve law enforcement to compensate for lack of solid discipline strategies, such as restorative approaches, they end up, often unintentionally, contributing to the systematic stripping of dignity, the police mistreatment, and the incarceration of the students whom they serve.

While some young people might commit crime and deviance on the streets, it is in the schools, often for minor infractions, where their deviance and defiance is amplified by officials, who then collaborate with law enforcement to further penalize students perceived to be at-risk or unruly. It is important to develop a framework for understanding how schools not only educate and socialize students, but also how they package and prepare certain students to be handed over to law enforcement. In other words, the school-to-prison pipeline should be understood as a mechanism by which schools are the initiators of the criminalization process. School personnel must acknowledge their participation in this process of criminalization, and take inventory of the school practices that prepare some children for prison.

The fact that the boys, in this particular instance, were already part of a criminalized class, produced hysteria in the school, as well as among police, parents, and the media. Latino boys who are criminalized often encounter a system of ubiquitous punitive social control that begins in school and spills over into the community, with police and adults reading their everyday behavioral practices as criminal. Ruben described his feelings regarding how white adults reacted to him in public:

...If you go with your homies, they stare at you, baggy clothes make you look suspicious around here. If you're walking in a little group, people are all scared of you. If hueros [Spanish slang for whites] are coming towards you, they'll get off the sidewalk so you can pass by, they're scared as fuck. It's like we're gonna' give them a disease.

In his interview, Ruben explained that the only guns he had ever been around were those used when hunting with his family. He appeared perplexed that a water bottle would get him in so much trouble:

I know that the teachers think I am some kind of trouble maker, but I never imagined that they would call the entire SWAT team to come hunt me down!...I've been taught that I should never carry a gun, I don't even know where my dad keeps his guns. I'm scared of guns. So how do you think I felt when those [police] guns got pointed at me?

In the focus group, the boys talked about their morning ritual. They went to the supermarket every morning, before making their way to campus for their first period. The boys talked about how the cafeteria food repulsed them. Some of their teachers encouraged healthy eating habits and even taught them lessons on eating nutritional food. However, the school did not provide them access to these kinds of foods. “It's like now we have a chance to eat a snack without getting into trouble in class, but some of us don't even bring snacks, and some of us don't get no lunch money,” Vince explained. Vince was frustrated that, although they were being taught healthy eating habits, they were unable to partake in the routine because they did not have enough money to eat well. Ruben further explained, “It only makes it more obvious who's got money, because that's who brings snacks and

stuff to school. The rest of us get hungrier just watching them eat.” When we asked if anyone ever shared their snacks with the rest of the classroom, they all looked at each other, and one of the boys answered, “Nah. Why would they give us any of their food? Usually, it’s the homies that offer each other to hook you up with some chips or something.” In their search for affordable food options, the boys became exposed to potential victimization from older youths, who would drive by the school looking for rival gang members or younger people to mess with. According to the boys’ own accounts, if the school had been able to provide them with tasteful snacks, it would have prevented their altercation in the first place.

Soon after the water bottle incident, the boys returned to their classrooms. They quickly forgot about the altercation and moved about their regular school routine.

Ruben: The thing is, we didn’t even know they [the police] were looking for us, we just knew the school had been locked down and the cops were searching for somebody who had a gun. Since I didn’t have a gun, I never even thought they were after us for that argument.

Vince: Yeah, and when they came into the class they came in with guns and dogs. Then they got us, but were all rough with us. One cop tried turning my wrists and when I pulled away, he said he would break my arm, and not even hesitate. I was like, “You’re hurting me. I didn’t even do anything.”

Ruben: Yeah, that was messed up. They had these big ol’ rifles and were pointing them at us until they took us to some rooms. They put us in separate rooms for a long time, too. It was like at least six or seven hours. And, they didn’t even want to tell my mom why I was still at school with the police. She heard the news from other neighbors at her job that there was a gun at the school. She got all worried and left work to see if I had been sent home. Then she found out I was being questioned by the cops. She got all mad and thought I had done something.

Mario: Did you tell her what really happened?

Ruben: Nah, she didn’t care. I guess she was just all worried and stuff ‘cus she thought the same thing that happened last time was going to happen again.

Mario: What happened last time?

Ruben: I was held at the police station like all night, because they thought I was involved with that one stabbing a couple years ago. They’re just always messin’ with me, though.

Vince: Yeah, they always mess with us. Like when they left us in those little rooms for like half the day. I even asked the cops that would check in on me if I was going to get lunch, and no one answered me. They just laughed at me and went away.

Ruben: I asked one of the cops for lunch and he told me to shut up. His partner, or whatever, stepped into the room with an open bag of chips and I thought he was going to be cool and share with me. Next thing I know, the cop throws a chip at me and says, “There’s your food; eat that if you’re hungry. If you’re not hungry, shut up.”

Vince: Yeah, and that wasn’t even the worst part of all. The worst part came when they put us all in the same room.

Mario: So, what happened when you were all put in the same room?

Ruben: They were shady. That’s all I can say.



Vince: They had us in that room together for like half an hour. We were all asking each other what the hell was going on. Plus, we were all like, “did any of you guys get any food?” We weren’t even given food from the cafeteria and that’s where they were getting their chips from.

Ruben: Yeah, then some police officer walks in and grabs one of the empty chairs in the room and puts it next to this cabinet. All of a sudden he stands on the chair and reaches into the box. The cop pulled out this recorder that was inside the box, then he looked at all of us and said, “We got you now. You should have cooperated earlier.”

Many of the youth who participated in our study shared that they had had enough negative experiences to outweigh the few positive ones with police officers, community center workers, and school officials. Most of the boys we interviewed expressed the belief that they were experiencing what we call “a youth control complex...where various institutions were collaborating to form a system that degraded and criminalized them on an everyday basis” (Rios, 2011). The boys felt as though their schools and communities were working towards pipelining them into incarceration, particularly when they were being arrested in their respective schools, and, later, fined by the courts for minor infractions. These violations came in various forms, the most common being possession of small amounts of marijuana, truancy infractions, and other forms of “aggressive” behavior that might be deemed too violent for the classroom. These actions were common practice in our observations, and were even acknowledged by a campus counselor whom we interviewed:

These kids aren’t thugs or killers. I think all kids need some guidance and discipline, but the way the cops treat the students isn’t right either. They talk to the kids with little or no respect. Then they get angry at the students’ response to their maltreatment. Usually, the kids talking back to the police officers, results in the police being extra rough on them physically. Some kids show up with bruises they claim were from being slammed to the floor by the police. For a simple “stop and search?” That ain’t right, man. I think if you treat the students like adults, they’ll begin to act like one.

Ruben had encountered other major negative experiences with police. In early 2007, two groups of youths were involved in a fight that resulted in one of the youths being stabbed, and, eventually, dying. Local law enforcement agents began rounding up many suspected gang members and their relatives, or known affiliates, for questioning. One of the 25 youths brought in for questioning was Ruben. The police knew that Ruben was related to a known gang member. They had gathered this information from the high school when Ruben was a freshman. Upon arriving at school, for his first day of classes, Ruben was asked by the principal if he was related to James, a former student. He told the principal that James was his brother. According to Ruben, the principal relayed the information to the school resource officer who then tracked Ruben down and placed him in a gang database.

Ruben was friends with the boy who was killed, and was in shock upon hearing of his friend’s death:

It was difficult to process what was going on. One minute I thought I was getting messed with for no reason, again. Then, all of a sudden, I found out this guy I knew was dead. They [the police] didn’t even let me tell them where I was [when the killing happened]. They were all like in my face and yelling at me, telling me they knew I wasn’t telling them what I knew.

According to Ruben, he had been across town when the stabbing occurred, and he had explained to the officers that he had no prior knowledge of who could have been involved in the altercation or stabbing of the other youth. Ruben told me that after they interrogated him for several hours, they left him alone in a room for another couple of hours before they came back for him. When they confirmed Ruben’s alibi, the police released him without an apology or an explanation as to why they believed he was involved.

## Juvenile Incarceration

While conducting our observations at this school, we observed dozens of citations and arrests of Latino boys. Most of the citing and arrests occurred outside of school, and were primarily for minor infractions. Some of the youth would hang out all day on street corners and parks during their school vacations, generally because many were too young for employment. However, while hanging out in their neighborhoods, especially in front of local establishments, the boys would receive police charges for loitering or disturbing the peace. Many times, the youths were trying to get out of the sun and cool off, because they didn't have air-conditioning at home. Other times, the youth shared with us, they were just quickly rushed through their purchases, and not allowed to "shop around" by merchants. The minor negative treatment and citations imposed on the boys, nearly on a daily basis, would later play a bigger role in further criminalizing them. One such example came a couple of years into this study, when the efforts of the local police department were directed towards having conversations with local civic and community leaders about creating a gang injunction. Twelve of the boys in our study were named in the injunction.

In addition to facing a continuum of school discipline, school-referrals to police, police harassment, gang injunctions, and labeling by adults in the community, some of the boys also faced being questioned by immigration enforcement officers about their citizenship status in the United States. Many of the boys' early memories are of their relatives being arrested and deported. Seven students remembered hiding from "immigration" even though they were born in California. They had to hide because their parents were undocumented or they had relatives from México living with them. One youth, Julio, was undocumented. He remembered hiding in bushes, behind trees, flat on the ground, or in the bed of a pickup. He remembered hearing his parents speaking to him, in Spanish, and telling him, "*Mijo, escondete. Por que si te ve la policia van a encontrar a ti y a tu tio y se los van a llevar a Mexico. Calladito, ok?*" ("Son, hide. If the cops see you, they'll find you and your uncle, and then they're going to send both of you back to Mexico. Quiet, ok?"). This young man had been detained before by border patrol for looking suspicious and undocumented, and when Julio was nine, and he lived in Los Angeles, his home was raided by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. Julio felt that it was harder for him, as an undocumented immigrant, to stay under the radar, even if he "followed all the rules," because he would always have to worry about both local law enforcement agencies and federal customs enforcement officials. Some young Latinos face layers of illegality, when the system has deemed them to be a criminal suspect group because of their racial and class status. Layers of illegality include being questioned and degraded for dressing in baggy clothes, being asked for citizenship status because they are brown, or being placed in a gang database because their friends or relatives are involved in gang activity.

Julio recalled being told by a school vice principal, "We know you are illegal and we want to help you, but don't push your luck, because we will start letting people know who you really are, and they will come here and take you away." The school officials made the boys feel as if they had the power to garner police and immigration resources on call. All four boys who were involved in the water bottle incident believed that the school had called the police about them to teach them a lesson, to discipline them for being the "bad guys" at the school.

## Community Segregation and Marginalization

On another occasion, when we started conducting a focus group with all four of these boys, three pointed at their friend, Marcos. One of them instructed him to tell us his story. Marcos told us about an altercation that had occurred earlier in the day. There were several youth gathered at a local Boys and Girls Club, playing basketball and tossing a football around. Marcos and his friends decided it was too hot to stick around, and, instead, walked over to one of their houses to hang out, watching music videos in the air-conditioning.

After a few hours of hanging out at their friend's house, the boys became bored, and began walking back to the Boys and Girls Club, where they had been hanging out earlier in the day. This time, however, they were stopped at the entrance of the facility and were told that they were no longer allowed to be there because of the fight they had caused earlier in the day. Community center workers then threatened to call the police on these boys if they did not leave the premises immediately. The staff told the boys that the vice principal had told them of the trouble they were causing at school. "They told us that the vice principal said we were instigating fights,

and that they should not let us hang out at the center.” Here, again, the school, the police, and the community center collaborated to criminalize and punish young Latinos deemed as threats. This in turn created a system of exclusion from institutions originally intended for nurturing—such as schools and community centers—and inclusion in institutions intended for punishment and control—such as probation, juvenile facilities, and jails.

Negative encounters with police, schools, and community centers led the boys into the streets to seek out older boys, with whom they would feel that they were affirmed and protected. Vince reported being told by an older gang member in the neighborhood that if he ever wanted to get the cops off his back, all he had to do was start hanging with the gang. We asked Vince, “Did any of your homeboys decide to take the older guys up on their offer?” Vince looked around for a little bit, and finally answered, “Yea, some of them decided to kick it with the older homies. I hardly see them anymore, though.” In this instance, public humiliation by the authorities did not serve as a deterrent for the future, but rather added “street cred,” or street celebrity, to these youth (Vigil, 2007). Being labeled or marked for minor transgressions would place the boys at the risk of being granted additional, more serious labels. In this case, the boys’ risk factors were hanging out with the *veterano* homeboys from the neighborhood, and, possibly, turning into one of the “shot callers”<sup>52</sup> of the gang. In turn, some of the boys would eventually be coerced or compelled by older boys to prove themselves by committing a crime. These negative interactions with authority figures strain young peoples’ ability to trust the system. In turn, the boys find an alternative institution to put their faith in, the gang, and, in particular, the older boys in the gang. Marcos explains, “I trust them [older boys]. Guys I trust and like, whenever I need anything, they are there. They are older guys, so when I need something, they are there.”

We also noticed heavier policing in the boys’ neighborhoods over the next few weeks after the water bottle incident. An example of heavier policing included the police driving up to where the youths were, getting out of their car, and then slamming the boys against walls, or against curbs. Some police officers would even go as far as handcuffing the youths in order to search them. The boys said they were embarrassed and humiliated by the cops and by the people from the community center. Some of their neighbors began calling the police about them. According to another youth, people in his neighborhood also began acting differently around him. The public humiliation brought on by the police officers and community center management was beginning to label the boys in new ways.

Historically, gang prevention or street-based programs have been organized by, or in conjunction with, churches and local organizations for youth delinquents. In this case, despite the youths’ attempts to enter the community center, they were turned away. The community center staff members were unwilling to assist boys who had been labeled gang members, and the staff’s actions created additional barriers for the boys to overcome.

## Teacher and Administration Discrimination

Teachers were observed to be intolerant to any type of “attitude” from the boys involved in the incident. Students were constantly compared to their “well-mannered” peer counterparts, and were asked to invoke their “good-spirited nature” in order to succeed in life and in their academic studies. Ruben described his very first interaction with a teacher, shortly after the school had been locked down:

Ruben: “Hey.”

Teacher: “Hey? Is that all you have to say for yourself?”

Ruben: “What do you mean, is that all I have to say?”

Teacher: “Yeah, I didn’t think you had it in you. None of you ever apologize for the damage you cause. The school is the real victim here, not you.”

The teacher was referring to the school being the victim of Ruben’s and his friends’ actions the previous

52. “Shot callers” is urban vernacular that refers to the gangs’ leadership.



day, which resulted in the high school being locked down. The teacher told Ruben that she was bothered that he was allowed back on campus without a suspension or alternative punishment. Ruben told us that the teacher made similar comments out loud in front of the class. When Ruben asked the teacher to “back off” and “leave him alone,” the teacher replied, “...if the school or local police can’t change you, I will.” As Ruben told us this story, his lips began to quiver and his eyes were slightly lubricated with what appeared to be rigidly held-back tears. We asked him, “Are you ok?”

Ruben: “Nah, I’m cool. Just tripping on how teachers don’t really care about you.”

Victor: “Why do you say that they don’t care about you?”

Ruben: “It’s like they never really liked me because they knew my family [his older brother and cousins had dropped out of school] and were just waiting for me to slip.”

Victor: “What makes you think they were waiting for you to slip?”

Ruben: “Like, the minute they find any little thing on you, they want to call the pigs to come and arrest you. I mean, that’s messed up. I’m not even from nowhere and they want to treat me like I’m a criminal.”

## Conclusion

Schools have tremendous positive power over the lives of students—the power to teach them academics; the power to socialize them to be engaged citizens; the power to transform their lives in positive ways—but schools also have negative power: the power to mark a student with a discipline record; the power to force a student out of school; and the power to catapult students into the school-to-prison pipeline. The multiple marginality that many working-class Latino students face in hyper-criminalized schools stems from a societal, racialized fear of immigrant populations, and a macro-economic transformation in which de-industrialization and post-industrialization have created the conditions for education systems to restructure themselves more punitively. Ergo, some marginalized Latino youths are no longer “learning to labor” but rather “preparing for prison” in their school settings. The multiple marginality that young working-class Latinos face today is one of a punitive society that treats and manages them, across institutional settings, as a suspect criminal class which is immersed in layers of illegality.

One key instrument for reversing the school-to-prison pipeline could be the implementation of restorative-justice approaches. Richard has assisted the school studied here to implement a restorative-justice process by facilitating conversations with students who are finding it difficult to learn conflict resolution skills and to share issues at home and at school with each other. Often, in this process, the youths address each other and discuss how they could treat each other on and off campus. Sometimes Richard guides the conversations, and, at other times, professionals from the local community take hold of the lessons. The youth find common ground, and, eventually, learn to respect each other and socialize in less confrontational and aggressive manners.

In addition to culturally-competent outreach workers, culturally-responsive teachers might help to ameliorate this school-to-prison pipeline. When educators fear young people because of the way they dress, where they come from, or where they live, they have little capacity to educate them, and, instead, have to rely on discipline as the key system for managing their pupils. There is a greater opportunity for equitable schools when classrooms are “responsive to the social and cultural diversity of the communities that they serve” (Cairney, 2000, p.10). Cairney cites researcher Jim Cummins’ work that “identified four structural elements of schooling,” which, Cummins argued, “influence the extent to which students from minority backgrounds are empowered or disadvantaged.” These elements include: incorporating minority students’ culture and language; including minority communities in the education of their children, pedagogical practices operating in the classroom, and the assessment of minority students (Cairney, 2000, p. 6).

In addition, culturally-responsive teaching recognizes certain cultural features of Latinos, and incorporates

those aspects into the curriculum (Waxman & Pardon, 2002). For example, a teacher who understands that Latinos place great importance on family and community would incorporate those aspects into their lessons (Waxman & Pardon, 2002). Teachers can also create a cooperative-learning environment where students work in small groups, which has been found to decrease student anxiety and improve English proficiency and social, academic, and communication skills (Calderon, 1991; Chrisitan, 1995; Rivera & Zehler, 1991). Also, teachers who provide opportunities for extended dialogue are especially effective in teaching Latino students, because students are able to develop language skills and higher-level thinking skills (Tharp, 1995; August & Hakuta, 1998; Duran, Dugan, & Weffer, 1997).

While school officials can claim to have their hands tied due to larger economic, political, or policy forces, there are some pragmatic steps that educators may take to begin to reverse at least some of the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline on Latino youths. Schools have the potential to change the pipeline because factors within schools may be controlled and transformed, such as improving relationships with teachers and implementing restorative-justice practices and policies. As such, school factors may influence student engagement as well as their personal characteristics, and these may play a role in providing protective factors that rival the protective factors provided by the gang (Sharkey, 2011). When high schools adopt a more empathic role with at-risk youth, and provide services like counseling, mentoring, and tutoring, research shows that violence and gang membership reports decrease. While educators don't have the resources to reverse the effects of structural forces that impact their students' lives, they do have the ability to change their interactional practices with students, become more culturally relevant, and implement restorative approaches. These minor changes might help to begin the process of eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline and create a cradle-to-college staircase instead.

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