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School Arrests in Delaware: An Exploration of Race and Place

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The overrepresentation of minorities in the various American penal systems is well documented (e.g., Western, 2006; Feld, 1999). School disciplinary systems are complicit in this trend and the increasingly punitive approach to school discipline that has emerged over the past two decades seems to exacerbate the problem (Nicholson-Crotty, et al., 2009). With the rate of arrests for misconduct in school generally on the rise (Krezmien, et. al, 2010), there is reason to believe that even more minority students are becoming ensnared in the juvenile justice system because of alleged misconduct in school. Amidst these troubling trends have emerged various explanations for disparate educational outcomes and the overrepresentation of minorities in the various American penal systems (e.g., O'Connor, et al., 2009; Kirk, 2008; Western, 2006; Downey & Pribesh, 2004). The relationships between students, schools, communities and misbehavior in school are the focus of much of this academic inquiry. In an attempt to advance our still-developing understanding of the disproportionate involvement of minority students in school discipline and the juvenile and criminal justice systems, this paper will explore whether minorities are overrepresented in school arrests in Delaware by analyzing a database of all school arrests in the state during the 2010-2011 school year. The analysis will also consider whether other factors have a bearing on which students are arrested in schools, including the students' home neighborhoods and the demographic characteristics of their schools. The findings of this proposed research will contribute to the growing discourse on the criminalization of school discipline. More specifically, it will provide insight into how one of the more severe school disciplinary measures - arrest - affects students who are most at risk for educational struggle and justice system involvement. Further, the results will contribute to the ongoing discourse on race, place, and the growing American penal state.