Audio file

[Research-Podcast-Barnes-Lee.mp3](https://michiganstate-my.sharepoint.com/personal/akb_msu_edu/Documents/Transcribed%20Files/Research-Podcast-Barnes-Lee.mp3)

Transcript

**Angie Kennedy**

Hello, my name is Angie Kennedy and I am the Associate Director for Research at the School of Social Work at Michigan State. Welcome to our Research Spotlight, where we profile some of the current research being done by School faculty members.

Today I am talking with Dr. Ashlee Barnes-Lee, a community psychologist who's currently a Dean’s Research Associate at the School. Dr. Barnes-Lee has an exciting project underway that involves evaluating the impact of restorative practices on Metro Detroit, middle schoolers’ disciplinary outcomes.

For example, one key question she wants to answer is: Do restorative practices lead to youth having fewer out of school suspensions and expulsions?

Dr. Barnes-Lee is also interested in better understanding how different school stakeholders such as students, parents, and school personnel experience these restorative practices.

Welcome and thanks so much for joining me today, Dr. Barnes-Lee.

So, to start off, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the school-to-prison pipeline and how it disproportionately affects different youth?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Hi Dr. Kennedy, thank you for having me today.

**Angie Kennedy**

Of course.

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

So yes, as defined in Monique Morris’ [*Pushout*](https://thenewpress.com/books/pushout), the school-to-prison pipeline refers to the collection of policies, practices, conditions, and prevailing consciousness that facilitate both the criminalization within educational environments and the processes by which this criminalization results in the incarceration of youth and young adults.

More simply, the school-to-prison pipeline describes a pathway in which youth are directed away from school and to the juvenile legal system.

One of the ways we see this playing out is through the use of exclusionary discipline, such as out of school suspensions.

When we think about statistics around out-of-school suspensions, Black youth are four times more likely to be suspended than their White peers. Black girls are 10 times more likely to receive discipline referrals than White girls.

And unfortunately, the disparities don't stop there. We also see that children who are low-income, students with disabilities, and students identifying as a gender and/or sexual minority are significantly more likely to receive discipline referrals to be suspended, expelled, or to be referred to law enforcement.

So it's a very serious problem.

**Angie Kennedy**

Yes. How can restorative practices interrupt or combat this pipeline? I know there's been some research on these practices, but not a lot. Can you talk a little bit about how effective restorative practice is based on what we know?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Absolutely, you know I wish that I could say that implementing restorative practices was enough to interrupt these invidious trends.

I really see adopting restorative practices as a starting point to help schools begin to create an environment that should already be present in our schools, so restorative practices are understood to be an integration of a set of procedures and a set of values that really emphasize what needs to be done to resolve conflict and human relationships. It focuses on students’ behaviors and not the person itself.

It seeks to understand how behavior impacts others and it aims to promote engagement and participation.

So the goal is really to create a positive school climate where school stakeholders feel a sense of belonging and a sense of community and focus on community building as opposed to implementing punishments that make students feel like outcasts. So these approaches would include peer mediation, peacemaking circles, schoolwide community building exercises and informal classroom meetings, for example.

So based on what we know, the emerging literature demonstrates that use of restorative practices is associated with decreases in out-of-school suspensions and discipline referrals. What we know less about is how effective restorative practices are at mitigating disparities in school discipline, and how restorative practices are implemented in predominantly Black school districts.

So, we see that responses to the school-to-prison pipeline—there have been interventions that have been developed. There are associations with decreases in exclusionary discipline.

Unfortunately, disparities are continuing to persist, and that is a part of the problem.

Just to give you more context, in 2016, the State of Michigan passed legislation requiring that schools use more restorative approaches to address school discipline. Charles Bell actually published a book this month—Charles Bell—published a book this month related to this topic, and indicates that suspension rates significantly increased between the 2015-2016 and 2018-2019 school years.

And so it's clear that much more work needs to be done to better support students, parents, teachers and school administrators in our state.

**Angie Kennedy**

Was he focused on Michigan data?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

His work actually specifically focused on Detroit Public Schools.

**Angie Kennedy**

Okay, so then, even though this law was passed, we know that restorative—at least based on the emerging kind of consensus about the effectiveness—that these practices do work, and they are helpful, it seems as though schools in Michigan may not actually be adopting these restorative practices or, we don't really know how common it is across the state, or…?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Yeah, one of the major barriers is that there's just not a lot of data being collected.

Too, so first of all, there is no centralized mechanism in which school districts are reporting their suspension rates, and so for example, based on the book that I was just mentioning, Charles Bell had to actually, he had to request a Freedom of Information Act.

He had to request Freedom of Information in order to actually obtain this data, and so a part of the problem in the state of Michigan is actually not knowing what the rates are right across all these different districts, and so he was able to focus a lot of his research in Detroit Public Schools.

My research is focused on a different district, but what we really need to do is start to have mechanisms in which school administrators or school districts are reporting that data, because that's kind of baseline in order for us to address these issues, we have to first know what is happening on a statewide level.

**Angie Kennedy**

Right! So the findings from your study, then, will hopefully help fill this gap about the effectiveness of this approach.

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Absolutely.

**Angie Kennedy**

Can you talk a little bit about your research team and some of the benefits of this type of collaborative approach?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Yes, so the research team is probably the most exciting aspect of this work. This project was funded by Spencer Foundation in collaboration with their urban learning and leadership collaboration (leadership collaborative). The team includes the principal of the middle school as well as a former student of the middle school; he's now in 9th grade.

And this collaborative approach is *such* a benefit to the research because we can integrate scholarly expertise, professional knowledge, and lived experience to drive the development and execution of this work.

So the voices of an academic, a school administrator with over three decades of experience, and a student in the context brings rich perspectives to the process and will be of great benefit when we begin to analyze the data.

**Angie Kennedy**

That's amazing, that sounds like a really wonderful team and just so many benefits to especially bringing in youth to actually be a part of the research team, it's really exciting. And I guess goes hand in hand in hand with your training as a community psychologist and you know, doing those community partnering relationships.

So I'm guessing as, since we're in this time of COVID still, that there have been some challenges in terms of partnering with the school during this time? What are some of the ways your research team has had to adapt in response to these challenges?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Yes, Dr. Kennedy, you're absolutely right. Like every other part of our lives right now, COVID has definitely posed challenges in this work as well. So, lucky for us, our grant sponsor has been supportive by offering an extension, so that we can have more time to collect all the data.

There was just significant delays in connection to having primarily out-of-school virtual learning, not being clear when we will be returning into the building and then once returning to the building having to deal with different challenges that come with schools that may not have all the resources available, such as: There was a power outage and then there was some issues with the air conditioning, and just different things that came up that just really impacted the project.

But we are currently focused on collecting the administrative data, and so we're working with a data management company to pull down information on the school code of conduct violations, the outcomes of those violations, and the sociodemographic characteristics of the students who receive those discipline referrals.

And the project also has a qualitative component, and so because we have this extension, we plan to start interviewing school stakeholders in the spring to learn about their on-the-ground experiences. So, for example, we are interested in knowing whether what we see in the data (the quantitative data) is reflected in how students feel school leaders respond when they do violate student code of conduct.

**Angie Kennedy**

So obviously your project right now is there been, you know, COVID related delays and everything and it's really just underway. How are you hoping to use the results from the study?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Another great part of the work, so you know, going back to you, mentioning my training as a community psychologist, you know I consider myself an action researcher and so engaging in research that is going to lead to something that is going to benefit the community is what helps, what drives me to do this work.

And so we plan to use the results to give back to the school.

We're going to use what we learn to develop an intervention or adapt an intervention that's aimed at promoting the use of restorative approaches as an alternative to exclusionary discipline, and importantly, to promote a positive school environment where students can feel heard, where parents can advocate for their students, where teachers feel supported and equipped to address challenges they may face in the class, and for school leaders to have the resources they need to keep everyone safe and focused on learning.

So we really hope to use the data to develop a contextually relevant, culturally relevant intervention to help build on the assets the school already possesses, and to address any gaps or barriers that may need to be addressed based on what we find.

**Angie Kennedy**

This is wonderful. Do you have any further thoughts or questions or information that you'd like to share about the project or anything else?

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Well, it's as we already kind of talked about, although it's been in progress for a while, you know, there have been some delays, so it's still just in the beginning stages, but I am really, really excited to be working with my partners, Dr. Carruthers, the student Jordan Spencer, as well as getting some assistance from MSW students here in the School, and BASW students as well.

So I'm really excited about this work and really hope to identify ways to disrupt, ultimately, disrupt this invidious trend. Yeah, so thank you so much for having me.

**Angie Kennedy**

Thank you so much for joining me and sharing your exciting project. I really appreciate it and I think we're all done. Thank you.

**Ashlee Barnes-Lee**

Thank you.