

# ***Criticism on Implementation of Zero Tolerance Policy in Schools***

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**Abstract:** Scientific research is increasingly showing the drawbacks and potential ill effects of zero tolerance policies on students. This article presents criticisms of the zero tolerance policy in four main areas: ambiguous definitions, exaggerated claims, abuses, and harmfulness. There is also a serious disparity in the treatment of racially diverse students under zero tolerance policies. It is important that schools that are still using punitive policies such as zero tolerance policies pay attention to these voices of accusation and make some adjustments in the context of the school. These criticisms and recommendations are intended to create a healthy and harmonious campus environment and to promote the physical and mental development of students.

**Keywords:** zero tolerance policy, school discipline, social and emotional skills, restorative justice.

## **1. Introduction**

Initially developed in the United States, zero tolerance refers to specific actions or behaviors that will not be tolerated. Zero tolerance has been used extensively for addressing possible misconduct in drugs, crime, and schools since it was introduced [1]. In the beginning, a zero-tolerance policy was designed to address serious crimes, such as gun ownership among students [2]. With the widespread dissemination and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in the 1990s, punitive policies, such as zero tolerance policies and no-excuse policies, were introduced to handle a wide range of misbehaviors. Zero tolerance policies imposed harsh punishments such as suspensions, expulsions, and juvenile justice referrals for a variety of student misbehaviors [3]. Schools have widely implemented zero tolerance policies in response to individual students' misbehaviors or risky behavior.

According to advocates, in addition to serving as a punishment, zero tolerance policies can serve as a deterrent and achieve harmony on campus by deterring violence or conflict on campus [4]. Nevertheless, past experiences with implementation suggest that zero-tolerance policies adhere to a social-level distribution of power and expose marginalized students to greater vulnerability [5, 6]. Based on the historical implementation of zero tolerance policies, this paper analyzes and gathers four levels of drawbacks: ambiguous definitions, exaggerated claims, abuses, and harmfulness. This paper attempts at all levels to draw on the perspectives of students and advocates to show where improvements are still needed to the zero tolerance policy. Since its promotion, the zero tolerance

policy has faced many criticisms. The purpose of this article is to summarize past criticisms and provide a clearer perspective on the shortcomings of the zero tolerance policy.

## 2. Ambiguous Definitions

There is a major complaint about zero-tolerance policies that lack a clear definition, which resulting in inconsistency in their implementation across schools [7]. Common zero-tolerance policy concepts include: maintaining relationships between individuals and teachers, peers, and other members of the school community; preventing or reducing youth violence and crime; maintaining an academic climate and safety in schools, etc. [4, 8, 9]. As a result, no specific guidelines for follow-up are provided because the definitions are vague and non-prioritized. Various historical research studies have demonstrated that many schools with zero-tolerance policies implement their own particular implementation strategies. It appears that on campus, decision-makers are free to apply unique strategies to achieve any goal they choose. While these implementation strategies vary widely, schools remain committed to the core idea of a zero-tolerance policy of prompt and clear consequences for incidents of any severity [7].

## 3. Exaggerated Claims

Zero tolerance policy proponents make significant claims about what these policies are capable of accomplishing. On the one hand, advocates give education professionals a good promise by stating that zero tolerance policies have the ability to eliminate all violence in schools. On the other hand, the advocates also gave reassuring assurances to students and parents that a safe and harmonious atmosphere would be ensured on campus. There is no doubt that there is a huge gap between the promises made by the advocates of zero tolerance policies and the actual achievements of zero tolerance policies. In a study of urban students by McNeal and Dunbar Jr., the vast majority of students reported that they felt unsafe despite the zero tolerance policy's intent to promote a safe learning environment. And, students also responded that on-campus security, the specific implementers of the zero tolerance policy, were oblivious to potential risk factors [10]. These responses exemplify the drawbacks of the zero tolerance policy that have not been raised by its advocates and also demonstrate the limitations of the zero tolerance policy.

Many proponents suggested that zero tolerance policies have been effective in reducing the frequency of violence in schools. They also proposed that student suspension rates have nearly doubled in the two decades since the zero-tolerance policy was implemented, indicating that schools have been remarkably effective in dealing with troubled students. However, these statements are subject to scrutiny. Based on these data, Martinez raises her doubts and objections. For instance, advocates of zero tolerance policies did not provide sources of information and data and failed to prove that the decrease in violence is a direct result of the use of zero tolerance policies [2].

## 4. Abuse

One of the serious phenomena associated with the implementation of zero tolerance policies on campus is the abuse of rights and punishments by practitioners. Martinez classifies the abuses in the zero tolerance policy as misuse and abuse and overuse of suspension [2]. On the misuse and abuse side, Martinez gives many examples of extreme misuse of zero tolerance policies, such as students dyeing their hair, using plastic knives for meals, and possessing water guns, among others. These are individuals whose behavior does not threaten the safety of others, yet the school staff still views these behaviors as dangerous and disciplines them. Another great problem with implementing a zero tolerance policy is the overuse of suspensions by faculty and staff. A large body of research literature indicates that there are cases of zero tolerance policies that disproportionately apply suspensions to

certain groups of students, such as students who belong to low SES families, students who are academically underachieving, etc. [2, 7]. However, sanctions such as suspensions are not effective in improving student misbehavior. Instead, the use of suspensions in zero tolerance policies can negatively affect academic performance and even lead to juvenile delinquency [2].

It is worth noting that the abuse of zero tolerance policies is particularly evident in the punishment of race and ethnicity groups. In a national study, researchers found significant racial disparities in student suspensions and expulsions [11]. For example, African American students were far more likely to be suspended or expelled than any other racial group. Not only that, but students of different races but similarly situated are treated unequally [11]. Even though zero tolerance policies are not inherently biased, when implemented on campus, zero tolerance policies target some race and ethnicity groups with more severe punishment than white students. Even though the advocates of zero tolerance policies have skillfully avoided the debate over race, these inequalities should still be taken seriously.

## 5. Harmfulness

There is a large literature on the potential harm of zero-tolerance policies to students' social and emotional skills. Both zero tolerance policies and no excuses policies emphasize academic achievement and high expectations for non-academic skills such as self-control and attention [12]. Such high expectations are often inconsistent with students' own abilities. Therefore, when schools impose expectations beyond an individual's current abilities, students may become anxious, depressed, or even engage in antisocial behavior because they are unable to meet such expectations. According to Bailey et al., self-regulation skills are very sensitive to the environment. Support or lack of support from family or peers and specific obstacles in the environment such as stress can negatively affect an individual's ability to do so [12]. Commonly, in a zero tolerance policy, any subtle or unrelated behavior of the student is magnified. For example, a student may be punished by standing for an extended period of time for nodding off in class. The harshness of a zero tolerance policy results in students not having the opportunity they deserve to explain their misbehavior. In a zero tolerance policy, responding to an individual's misbehavior with punishment is intended to prevent the same behavior from recurring in the future. However, preventing children from natural situations in which misbehavior may occur also prevents them from learning strategies to self-regulate in these situations and thus ultimately prevent misbehavior on their own [12]. When students lose the right to self-reflect and self-regulate from misbehavior, they are also deprived of the opportunity to show that they are actively correcting a mistake.

In addition to students' own emotional management and regulation, zero tolerance policies have been shown to jeopardize adolescents' intellectual development and predict more misbehaviors. One of the goals of zero tolerance policies is to prevent more delinquent behavior. However, a review of the evidence suggests that the zero tolerance policy as implemented has failed to achieve the goals of an effective school discipline system or to improve school climate or school safety. Instead, it has even exacerbated the problem of the overrepresentation of minorities in school punishment [8]. Zero tolerance policies have long used punitive measures such as suspensions, expulsions, and even referrals to juvenile justice to respond to student disruptions of school discipline. From the starting point of zero tolerance policies and the predicted outcomes, such punitive measures do seem to prevent students from making the same mistakes again by creating intimidation and authoritative repression. However, in terms of actual operational results, the zero-tolerance policy does not effectively deter students from misbehaving. Instead, such a policy may jeopardize the relationship between students and teachers or peers and may create more conflicts.

## 6. Alternatives to Zero-Tolerance Policies

The use of restorative justice in schools has received more endorsement than traditional punitive policies. Restorative justice is an emerging model of justice that has been proposed in recent decades to repair the relationship between victims and offenders by creating a circle of equal communication. The implementation of restorative justice in schools has shown positive results in different aspects of conflict management, interpersonal interaction and reintegration. Due to the large amounts of positive accomplishments of restorative justice in the justice system, there are increasing proposals to use restorative justice in the educational system to create a more harmonious school environment. Today, restorative justice theory has moved from the margins to the mainstream of educational policy. The implementation of restorative justice in schools is based on an indigenous tradition that emphasizes interconnectedness and relationships for the well-being of all community members, in order to make educational policy and practice more responsive and restorative to the needs and concerns of the school community [13]. It is worth mentioning that most evaluations of existing restorative discipline programs have shown a significant effect of improving student relationships, increasing accountability for misconduct, and largely reducing rates of suspension, expulsion, and other negative consequences.

## 7. Gaps and Future Directions

Zero tolerance policies are defined differently in different research papers, but they are rarely mentioned in the literature. Future research may be able to explore the differences in effects that may result from different definitions of zero tolerance policies.

Another important potential future research direction is to further examine the effects of zero tolerance policies on students with different characteristics based on student diversity. There are many individual factors that may contribute to differences in the effects of zero tolerance policies. For example, different personalities may cause students to have different levels of acceptance of zero tolerance policies, so some students may benefit from them while others do not. Examining the diversity of individuals can help provide a more objective understanding of the pros and cons of zero tolerance policies.

There is a large number of articles suggest that the implementation of zero tolerance policies could be detrimental to the development of students' social and emotional skills. However, there is not enough research behind these articles to directly demonstrate how punitive policies impair an individual's social and emotional skills. Therefore, subsequent research could focus more on demonstrating the direct link between zero tolerance policies and individuals' social and emotional skills rather than indirect effects. In addition, I observed that many of the studies on the implementation of zero tolerance policies in schools collected data only in a single school, which led to some limitations in the findings. Moreover, single sample studies may lead to a lack of internal validity of the findings as researchers may not be able to make comparisons on some key factors individually. Future research could focus on analyzing the direct relationship between zero tolerance policies and students' affective skills and use a larger sample.

## 8. Conclusion

This article presents criticisms of the zero tolerance policy in four main areas: ambiguous definitions, exaggerated claims, abuses, and harmfulness. And, there is also a serious disparity in the treatment of racially diverse students in zero tolerance policies. It is important that schools that are still using punitive policies such as zero tolerance policies pay attention to these voices of accusation and make some adjustments in the context of the school. These criticisms and recommendations are intended to

create a healthy and harmonious campus environment and to promote the physical and mental development of students.

Scientific research is increasingly showing the drawbacks and potential ill effects of zero tolerance policies on students. This indicates that the way zero tolerance policies are applied in schools requires substantial change and that schools should not rely exclusively on punitive measures, but should be flexible enough to incorporate humane alternatives such as restorative justice to improve school discipline problems. While correcting student misbehavior, schools should also consider the development of students' social and emotional regulation skills. Only by growing up in a humane and respectful environment can students develop in a more positive way.

To sum up, while proposing alternatives to the zero tolerance policy, the article makes substantive recommendations for subsequent improvements in the school environment and discipline.

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