

In Bedford, Texas, a 16-year-old honor student was expelled after a security guard noticed a kitchen knife on the floor of the student's car. The knife apparently had fallen unnoticed as the student carted some of his grandmother's possessions to Goodwill. He was ordered to spend a year in a juvenile-justice education program and banished from district property and school-sponsored activities. [...] In Deer Lakes, Pennsylvania, a kindergarten student was suspended for bringing a toy axe to school. He was dressed as a firefighter for Halloween. [...] In Thornton, Colorado, a fifth-grade girl was arrested for sexual harassment after repeatedly asking a classmate if he liked her. (Starr 2)

Zero tolerance is a policy concerning issues in today's society that are thought to be extremely dangerous. The three main focuses of the policy are incidences of violence, drugs, and alcohol. Zero tolerance treats children as if they were adults, and removes the "innocent until proven guilty" philosophy on which our country thrives. This policy could be extremely harmful to the lives of the students it affects and, "[...] disrupts the lives and educations of good students nearly as often as it does those of troubled students." This happens by treating all offenses dealing with the aforementioned issues and all students equally, even if the student has had a flawless record and had obviously no harmful intent (Starr 1).

Before the zero tolerance idea came about, the school system treated discipline in a completely different manner. Each student would be evaluated based on their prior record, where and when the incident occurred, and what the circumstances were surrounding the incident. If a student was a relatively good kid with no past disciplinary actions taken against him or her, they were much more likely to have a punishment that actually taught them something, rather than creating a sense of resentment towards the school authorities, and "the system" in general. Before the era of zero tolerance, a kid with a great future ahead could not screw it all up by making one simple mistake.

The line that zero tolerance crosses is one of intent. Zero tolerance looks only at the offense that has been made, not at the circumstances that brought it about. If someone with no intent of doing something unlawful accidentally commits a crime, they are punished equally with one who deliberately inflicts harm.

So how did zero tolerance laws come about? When major incidences of school disruption, like the Columbine shooting, started occurring, school officials decided they needed to start cracking down on discipline. After realizing certain things were starting to get out of hand, the federal government made it mandatory for, "[...] a zero tolerance policy toward the possession of illegal drugs and weapons on school grounds," (Copenhaver 1).

In the beginning days of zero tolerance, the laws truly did focus on behavior that could be deemed dangerous and criminal, and required a mandatory expulsion for having a gun on school property. However, since it's origin, the policies have

expanded to include infractions that pose no actual threat to any person, including the individual that broke the rule. Zero tolerance has even gone so far as to define, "[...] aspirin, Alka-Seltzer, and Certs as 'drugs' and paper clips, nail files, and scissors as 'weapons'," which puts an incredible amount of innocent students at risk for suspension or expulsion (Wright 1).

With the zero tolerance policy, the government is harming kids a lot more than they are helping protect anyone. It is truly just good politics for them to say they are cracking down on *everything* to protect our kids, when in fact they are just accelerating the path to delinquency that many of these students are already at risk for. When suspended or expelled from school, kids are placed into an environment with a lack of adult supervision and are exposed to many opportunities to get into even more trouble. Also, children that have been expelled or suspended from school are at a much higher risk of quitting school completely: "Kids often interpret suspension as a one-way ticket out of school - a message of rejection that alienates them from ever returning to school," (Wright 2).

Not only does this policy hurt students in a way that can never be fixed, it is a direct violation of their civil rights. The United States guarantees every person certain inalienable rights, namely life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Their right to all three are jeopardized and sometimes completely taken away with zero tolerance. When a kid gets suspended or expelled from school, they are often also referred to the justice system. School officials are relying heavily on actual police officers to handle disciplinary actions that deal with guns, drugs, or violence. As in the example in the beginning of the paper, a kid that was trying to help his grandmother out by taking some items to Goodwill can get expelled from school and enter the justice system. Studies show that after a kid in their early teens enters the justice system, especially when they are suspended from school, they are much more likely to remain in a life of crime and end up with a lack of education (Wright 1).

When a student is found in violation of a zero tolerance policy, they can be immediately suspended or expelled without any sort of legal action. Many times the school administrators do not even contact the parents of the offender to notify them that the infraction has occurred. As the judicial system is arranged to protect the innocent, circumvention of it treats all children in the schools as criminals. In essence, the implementation of zero tolerance laws tramples on the basic concepts upon which America was founded (Koch 1).

Children are different from adults, and should be treated as such. If a child makes a mistake and receives proper guidance, and when necessary, punishment, he or she is likely to recover from it. If a fully grown adult is discussing a terrorist activity, or draws a picture about it, one can have a much better chance of assuming they have potentially harmful intents about it. However, when a five-year-old draws a picture about what happened at the

World Trade Center, he or she is most likely not planning any actions of mass-destruction, but merely expressing their grief in the only way they can feel and share it (Ayers and Dohrn 1).

In 1998, over three-million students were suspended from school in the U.S. alone. Thousands more were expelled. The vast majority of these punishments were for minor offenses - the inevitable result of children acting like children. The emotional and educational fallout from those punishments, however, reach much farther, sometimes into adulthood (Starr 4).

Zero tolerance is truly destroying the lives of children all across the country. In Colorado Springs, Colorado, the school district honestly believes the consequences it bestowed upon a six-year-old relating to the school's zero tolerance drug policy are correct and fitting to the situation. The administrators from the school called an ambulance after witnessing the boy give another student some candy. The teacher that saw this claimed the brand was one that they did not recognize, and school officials relayed to the student's parents the message that, "[...] a child who brings candy to school is comparable to a teen who takes a gun to school," (Cassingham 2).

A thirteen-year-old was inspired to build a model rocket after watching the movie "October Sky." The rocket, constructed of a potato chip canister and fueled by three match heads, was seized during a locker search at his school. The school administrators classified the rocket as a weapon and decided to suspend the boy, based on the school's zero tolerance policy dealing with weapons. To add insult to injury, the school officials decided to call the police and have the case transferred to juvenile authorities. Since when did the country become so close-minded about being on the forefront of technological advances, and unpromoting of leadership in technological innovation, creation, and individualism? (Cassingham 3).

Undoubtedly, certain rules and procedures need to be created to encourage a sense of conduct and promote a learning environment in the schools, but such inflexible policies as zero tolerance have been shown to be inefficient. If school officials took each case of school discipline infractions on an individual basis, evaluating it to best determine the action needed to be taken, many lives could be saved from going down the drain. Schools do have a responsibility to keep children safe, and a policy that kept real weapons out of school would be great. Zero tolerance policies, on the other hand, treat a child pointing a chicken finger at someone else the same as a person pointing a shotgun at someone (Starr 4). The way a zero tolerance policy is set up takes any individual characteristics out of a case, and calls for a certain response to any situation involving a rule, such as violence or guns - there is no zero tolerance that actually works.

Calling every encounter between genders "sexual harassment" tells the actual victims of that crime that their horrible experience was relatable to that of a

schoolyard crush. Telling people that handing out candy is similar to distributing heroin laced with rat poison is relaying the message that the real, hard drugs are not that bad. Also, calling the use of vernacular "racism" is implying that people that truly do suffer from racial issues are actually complaining about nothing really important. Finally, this tells people that that are not involved in these issues at all that these things are actually just trivial, and they do not have anything to worry about (Cassingham 3).

Zero tolerance policies must be stopped because they are simply not benefiting children in any way. These policies are providing the illusion that schools are dealing with trouble youth, when in fact they are simply attempting to shove it outside and lock the door. The problem is, these policies are locking the children out, too.