From Migration Pathways to Suburban Securitized Schools: New Directions in Wrap-around Carcerality and Racialization

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The “carceral continuum” framework shows how systems of punishment follow young people across different settings by examining the neighborhoods and schools of urban Black and Latinx youth. In this paper, I extend that frame to one that also includes young people’s migration experiences and examines the suburban school context. Drawing on data from a school ethnography and student interviews in upstate New York, this study shows the cumulative impact of exposure to different punishment systems for Latinx youth with vulnerable immigration statuses. In this case study, the majority of the Latinx students were undocumented and some were applying for asylum. Nearly all these students migrated into the U.S. as unaccompanied minors. Experience with school discipline was an extension of painful migration pathways, including police harassment and incarceration. The school was highly securitized with its many security guards, uniformed police, cameras, metal detectors as well as other security tools and used punitive “zero-tolerance” discipline practices such as suspending students for being tardy to class. Like their peers, these students felt harassed, but they also felt unsafe and unfairly disciplined, attributing this to the school disliking Latinxs and framing them as undesirable “illegals.” Placing the migration experiences of youth alongside school experiences illustrates added layers and intensity of the carceral continuum in the lives of many Latinx youth.

Urban education scholars have documented the development of the security state inside U.S. urban schools over the past two decades (e.g. Fine 1991; Brotherton 1996; Devine 1996; Nolan 2011; Shedd 2015). Many schools began using a “zero-tolerance” approach to student discipline where even the lowest level of student misconduct is harshly punished, modeled after the “tough on crime” approach in the criminal justice system (Fabelo et al 2011). The presence of police in schools also expanded in schools across the U.S., (The Advancement Project 2013).

Like the state’s shift in crime policies, urban schools use zero-tolerance policies and police as a tool of social control (Giroux 2003). This form of social control is different than

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1 Zero tolerance is prompt and severe punishment, typically suspension or expulsion including for first time offenders for minor school infractions (Nolan 2011:1). A recent study tracking over a million school children for six years found that the students who were suspended or expelled were much more likely to later be in the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al 2011: xii). And, analysis of national survey illustrates Black and Latinx students are suspended at higher rates than non-Hispanic whites. These differences are also generally “not attributable to different levels of misbehavior” (Finn and Servoss 2014:2)
earlier decades because it is based on centralized standards and new non-teaching security staff, often police officers (Kafka 2011:96). Most school discipline is for non-violent incidents (USDOE 2014: ii). Nonetheless, schools justified securitization as a safeguard against risky situations. This reasoning was largely driven by the dominant U.S. public’s racial fear of Black students (Kafka 2011; see also, Ioanide 2015).

**Racialized Systems of Punishment Across Contexts.** The “carceral continuum” framework shows how experiences with systems of punishment in urban neighborhoods and schools shape young people’s perceptions of safety, injustice and race. Carla Shedd (2015) documents how many urban Black and Latinx youth attend securitized schools with severe punishment, and how this punishment system extends into their neighborhoods where they are also harassed by the police and sometimes arrested. She stresses how the paths youth take can often “subject the student to greater scrutiny, surveillance, and violence—either physical or symbolic” (2015: 40). Rios (2017) also finds that law enforcement and schools construct and treat urban “gang-associated” Latinx youth as threats, adding that when they are undocumented immigrants, there are extra "layers of illegality" where school officials threaten these youth with deportation to scare them as a form of punishment (2017: 154). Yet, the “carceral continuum” many Latinx immigrant youth traverse goes beyond school and neighborhood; it includes their migration pathways.

The immigration literature describes the way immigration policies and practices that have criminalized immigrants (e.g. Abrego et al 2017; Massey et al 2016) have had a wide-ranging impact--from traffic stops and racial profiling (Armenta 2017; Jones 2012, 2018), to living in mixed-status families where you fear someone you love and depend on will be deported (Dreby

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2 95% of out-of-school suspensions are for nonviolent, minor issues, e.g. tardiness or disrespect
2015). Jefferies (2014) shows how immigration “sweeps” in the Boston area in neighborhood with many Latinxs made undocumented Latinx youth and their families afraid to send their kids to school because they feared deportation. And, in some schools there has been an actual school to deportation pipeline (Hlass 2018; Dreier 2018). Yet, school and any resulting experiences with the criminal justice or immigration systems are also just the latter part of many of these young people’s carceral continuum. Many of them are moving from harrowing migration journeys into highly securitized schools.

**The Present Study.** This paper extends the framework of the carceral continuum to one that includes young people’s migration experiences. Drawing on data from a school ethnography and student interviews in upstate New York, this study shows how migration experiences shape students’ perceptions of their experiences with the carceral state in school. This high school was highly securitized with its many security guards, uniformed police, other security tools including cameras and metal detectors. The school also practiced punitive “zero-tolerance” discipline policies such as suspending students for being tardy to class. In this school case study, the majority of the Latinx students were undocumented and some were applying for asylum. Nearly all these students migrated into the United States as unaccompanied minors.

The additional layers of exposure to punishment systems in different settings for Latinx youth with vulnerable immigration statuses led to different views of wellbeing, fairness, racial identities than their African American peers. For the Latinx youth, experience with school discipline was an extension of already painful migration pathways that included police harassment and incarceration. As a result of their experiences with school security and discipline, nearly all the students that I met in the school felt harassed. Yet, Latinx youth also felt unsafe
and unfairly disciplined. They also attributed this inequity to the school disliking Latinxs and framing them as undesirable “illegals.”

**Case Study and Methodology**

For this research, I conducted a focused case study of Sandhill High School (SHS), in Crane, New York. I selected the case using U.S. Census and National Center for Education Statistics data. Crane is a small town of about 30,000 people, a low-income suburb of New York City. New York State is an ideal place to study recent undocumented Latinx immigrants’ experiences with migration and school discipline practices because New York has been one of the most aggressive implementing zero tolerance and it has also received a high number of unaccompanied minors from Central America as well as a growing number of undocumented youth from Mexico.

Low-income suburban schools like SHS are an important type of case that is both increasingly common and typically overlooked in studies of educational inequality. The gentrification of New York City has pushed many people into low-income suburbs outside of the city. Many of the students I spoke with had previously lived in New York City, or their families had. As well, like many low-income suburbs, Crane is a new immigrant destination. Historically a white and Black community, Crane is now mostly Black with a large and growing immigrant Latinx population. The immigrants are mostly from Mexico, but some are Central American, largely Hondurans. As earlier said, low-income suburbs like SHS have even more challenges than their urban counterparts because they have fewer political and economic resources, weak teachers' unions and limited public support.

**Data for the Study.** For this study, I used multiple qualitative methods. The bulk of the data I collected is from formal interviews and informal conversations with SHS students, as well
as adults working with the students at SHS. I also spoke with adult members of community-based organizations and non-profits serving the students. In addition, I collected ethnographic data by volunteering and hanging out at SHS for two school years from 2013-15 (over three hundred hours of fieldwork) to understand the local context better and to recruit for interviews. My analysis is also informed by reviewing local newspaper coverage of education issues, school documents and education policy analysis.

I rely heavily on student interviews because I am primarily interested in how youth make sense of school. I included adults working with the students in my interview sample to learn from people who had long-term relationships with the students. My interviews with the adults who work at the school helped to enhance and triangulate the information I gained from students themselves. I was particularly interested in speaking with adults with whom SHS students had developed close and trusting relationships. I formally interviewed forty-seven immigrant and U.S.-born Black and Latinx students, twenty-five boys and twenty-two girls. I talked informally with these students, and many others, in and outside of class, on and off campus for two years.

### Latinx Youth Migration Pathways

Fifteen-year-old Edgar’s small frame and round face made him look a bit young for a high school student. During an interview, Edgar explained how right after his fourteenth birthday, Edgar started his journey from Honduras to the U.S. with his grandpa. After they crossed into Texas, immigration chased and caught everyone in his group except him. Edgar hid in the desert overnight with no water, money, phone or food. He stayed up thinking about how he was lost and alone and might die. By the morning he felt overwhelmed and decided to let immigration catch him too. As a result, he was temporarily incarcerated, at first in the same cell as his grandpa but then moved to a different one for youth. He later learned, they deported his grandpa and he never saw him again. Edgar described how immigration then
took him to a “carcel” called “Las Hieleras” (The Coolers). It was freezing and the food was so bad he could barely eat it. He emphasized that he was packed in there tight with all very young kids, some as young as five years old, separated from their parents. He stressed that some of the children were hurt, and one had a bone completely broken. Edgar was astonished, how when even that child asked for a hospital they would not take him, and that the next day they sent him back to Mexico. Edgar’s was learning a deep sense of injustice for youth like him through his migration path. He learned that the U.S. government could and would treat young migrants in cruel ways, that their lives did not deserve protection and their needs did not deserve attention.

Edgar explained that he wanted to communicate via this interview to the children who are thinking of making the journey to the U.S. that it is very hard. “Se sufre. [Ves] los huesos de las personas que se habían muerto en el camino.” (You suffer, you cry, you see the bones of people that died along the way.) He explained, “[Los coyotes] dicen, ‘Ustedes no se pueden defender, los podemos ir a matar ahí’ y ya.” (The coyotes tell you, ‘You can’t defend yourself, so we can just kill you’). You learn about how hard life is, sadness, suffering, and that you may die. Edgar described that he is currently “peleando” (fighting) with immigration to get papers stay in the United States.

Migration pathways have become more punishing than previous decades. The combination of restrictive immigration policy, increased militarization of the southern border and growing economic and political problems in many Central American countries has engendered a growth young Latinxs migrating to the U.S. alone and exposed to carceral systems (Kandel et al 2014; Massey et al 2016). For many of the Latinx students, criminalizing experiences with school discipline was an extension of already painful and stigmatizing migration paths.
All of the Latinx immigrant youth I met with vulnerable immigration statuses came into the U.S. with smugglers. In their migration journeys, the students had seen people die, already dead, and seriously injured and denied medical attention in holding facilities. Not every undocumented Latinx student had harsh migration experiences, but the great majority of them did. They ran from police, nearly starved and hid from people who tried to rob them. These students were anywhere from twelve to seventeen when they made their journeys. Other students had migrated at younger ages and had fewer memories. One student from Mexico was drugged so he would sleep and travelled in the backseat with a coyote posed as his grandmother.

Many undocumented SHS students were from Central America. All of them explained they had to travel to the U.S. alone, and had been detained in various holding facilities along the way. Many were like an SHS student named Jesus from Guatemala. He described his migration journey as being seized by the immigration police and then put in a series of different prisons. He described one “prison” that was also “a house for minors” where he was “locked up” for four months. He thought it was a prison because he could not go outside or even see daylight. His parents signed papers to give custody over to his uncle, who then sent papers to the “prison” and so he was able to get out eventually and funded a ticket so he could be sent to Crane, New York where his uncle lived. Like many youth I met similar to Jesus, he just worked for the first year in Crane, not attending school, to pay money back to his uncle and coyote. He still works at a pizza shop but now also attends school. He explained that he was happy to attend school because it enabled him to make friends, yet he also struggled with the security regime of the school and his attendance had been faltering.

Latinx students often explained how undocumented immigration status was a Latinx issue. As Esteban explained, “Latinos, don’t get as much rights as other people do, they are denied
certain things because they're not citizens, and it's not easy living like that. Because of that, some of the Latinos are living in poverty.” Esteban was anxious both because his mother was ill and could not get the medical care she needed as well as because he had trouble finding work and getting paid fairly for it due to being undocumented. As Esteban put it, “You don't have benefits like the other people do because you’re illegal.”

Undocumented Latinx students were once mostly in immigrant gateway cities but have increasingly come to more isolated areas in the U.S., like Crane. Many of these immigrants chose isolated destinations in part because immigration law criminalized them and their families (see Massey et al 2002; Massey and Capoferro 2008:30-2). They likely hoped to be less patrolled by immigration enforcement in a small place like Crane. And, Crane did seem to be a place off the radar from immigration enforcement. As a local immigrant rights community organizer in Crane explained, unlike some of the larger cities nearby, in Crane the police were not profiling people as Latinx and asking for documents. And when I asked students about problems with police or immigration enforcement due to undocumented immigration status, they shared that in Crane it had not generally been a problem. One undocumented Latinx student bragged to me he did not have a driver’s license and when the police stopped him they merely checked his student ID and issued him a ticket.

Because Crane was an isolated place and a new immigrant destination, there were also fewer resources available to undocumented students compared to large central cities with well-established immigrant communities. Many undocumented Latinx students had limited access to information about getting immigration papers, and most did not know about DACA, or understand what it was if they had. As Rubén (a high school senior) replied when I asked him about it, “that new thing?” Raul, (also a senior at SHS) explained, “I don't think I applied for it
yet, but I don't know.” Zoe, a SHS tutoring program coordinator, also stated that few of these students knew what DACA meant or sought help to apply for it.

**A Highly Securitized School.** SHS did not have a violence problem, but security was growing and student suspensions were rising. In my time as SHS, I noticed that the bathrooms, lunchrooms, classroom and hallway passage, and school dress code were all strictly managed with the support of police, security staff and new technologies, including student-tracking computer software and comprehensive security cameras. School security was a key social organizing mechanism at SHS. As Jane (a longtime member of the school’s tutoring staff) put it, “Everything in this school is organized around security.” She explained, “There’s pretty much always police officers on campus. There’s many security officers, there’s double doors where there used to be single doors last year; they search everyone’s backpacks.” The central outcome of expanded securitization was that students were patrolled even when they managed to avoid being punished.

In early 2013, SHS implemented new and expanded surveillance technology, added non-teaching security staff and police patrol. In addition, the school instigated a strict “zero-tolerance” discipline system where students were suspended for low-level offenses like being late to class or breaking the school’s dress code, often “off-the-record.” SHS also purchased new student monitoring technology and the metal detectors. SHS administrators described the “security upgrades” to the public in a press conference video that year with the local newspaper. One school administrator explained, although there was not a security problem at SHS, “We like to be proactive rather than reactive.” The school had added new security cameras, extra security staff and installed a second set of doors at the entrance, because, as he explained, it was important for safety that “people be aware that someone is watching them.” The superintendent
explained in the press conference that students now had to “swipe in” with an issued ID card upon entering the building, and that the school had installed a metal detector that individuals had to pass through to attend basketball games. The school also locked the student bathroom doors ten minutes before each class and ten minutes before class ended to prevent students from “hiding” in them as a strategy to enforce class attendance.

In 2014, SHS acknowledged in a public web video that student suspensions had been “climbing” in recent years and that it recognized parent concern that student suspensions were too high. The administrators explained in the video that they were working hard to reduce suspensions. Even though, they had not yet been able to do so, they asserted that they were “re-thinking assisting at-risk children.” They also stated they had “put together different hallway climate action plans,” and were “working toward a positive rather than punitive environment.” Yet, moving away from a 'punitive environment' was not reflected in either the students’ daily experiences or the school’s own code of conduct manual. The manual explained that a student could be disciplined for any type of “disorderly student” behavior, which “could result in suspension.” It identifies disorderly student behavior as “substantially disruptive to the educational process,” or that which, “substantially interferes with the teacher's authority over the classroom.” Examples were things such as “making unreasonable noise,” or “willful defiance,” or “running in the hallway.” As well, it described that students could be disciplined if they “engage in conduct that is insubordinate,” such as, “failing to comply” with staff directions. The code of conduct also reminded students that “Search and Seizure” was permitted as long as the school had “reasonable suspicion to do so.” Hallways signs told a similar message stating, “Lockers can be searched at any time.” Thus, a punitive environment persisted as SHS’s strategy to manage student behavior.
**Security Technology.** Student conduct is more tightly managed than in previous historical periods, and new technology plays a role in this expansion. In 2014, the school leadership reported in a public web video that they had recently “purchased a web-based student management system,” which was “an add-on to the system” that they already had. In the video, the school explained that the new system “tracks the interventions” they made “with groups and subgroups of children to see if we’re being successful.” The SHS school code of conduct manual explained that this new system was called CAASS, “Comprehensive Attendance Administration and Security System.” CAASS “requires that each student be issued a photo identification card that will be scanned each morning upon entry to the school building and to the school cafeteria.” As well, CAASS, “automates the attendance tracking process… The discipline management module will alert staff members if a student is suspended, tardy, or has cut a class through audible and visual alerts that are triggered when a student swipes his or her card.”

To do my fieldwork at SHS, I had to get an SHS photo ID from the school’s security room. Two people worked there, and it was their job to sit in front of a wall full of television screens. One person took my picture and made the ID. As I waited, I watched them observing the screens full of the students going about their days. There were security cameras throughout the building and outside the school. The school’s code of conduct described these cameras as first and foremost as necessary “in order to assist the District to maintain student discipline.”

When I entered the school, I watched the security guard sitting with their computer screen full of student faces on IDs. To enter the school, students had to be buzzed in by security, and then approach the security desk to swipe their ID. The electronic card reader also reported messages to students such as “visit the principal’s office.” Teachers and other school staff also used to the web-based computer tracking system (CAASS), which informed them of where
students should be at all times. If a student was not cleared by security to attend class, the teacher could not let them participate. Their location and status were continually tracked by the CAASS computer system. The system also longitudinally followed the student and tracked their disciplinary record for staff to review.

*Non-teaching security staff & police.* When I walked the school halls, I saw not only the eight security guards in their brightly colored jackets that read “SECURITY” in bold letters, but also administrators and some teachers stationed in the hall watching the students as they passed through the hallways between classes. There were several bells alerting students to hurry to class. A common occurrence was hearing a security guard call out to the students, "No standing in the hallways." SHS required students to move with efficiency to class and thus did not allow them to stand. Security staff routinely told students to "move along," when they were outside the school. They were not allowed to "loiter" after school. Anyone who missed the bell had to go to "ISS" (In-School-Suspension) for the class period. When I walked through the hallways, I often heard security guards stop tardy students: "You, ISS. You, ISS. You, ISS." Students and teachers explained that students were not allowed into their classrooms if they were even a few seconds late. SHS required teachers to lock their doors and bar late students without a pass from the front security desk. Yet, teachers and students shared that the security guards typically did not give students a late pass. As a result of this practice, tardy students were often in detention for the class period.

The school administration criminalized the entire student population through its approach to security. In the 2013-14 school year SHS officially suspended 22% of its students, up from 16% the previous year. In contrast, the neighboring high school to SHS with mostly white and affluent students suspended just 5% of its students. That suspension rate reflects only the total
The actual number of out-of-school suspensions at SHS was much higher than 22%, due to the same students being suspended multiple times. As well, 21% of SHS students received in-school suspensions (ISS).

Students also reported that they were suspended informally for partial days, but that these partial suspensions did not count on their record. They were sent to ISS for the remainder of the class period (such as, if they were late), or were sent home for the rest of the day (e.g., for breaking the dress code). As a student named Destiny explained, “They try to go to the principal for a pass and they'll send you home for the rest of the day, it won't get counted as a suspension but you still get sent home.” Some students even reported these part-day suspensions as a positive thing because they were concerned about amassing a disciplinary record. Therefore, while the overall school disciplinary record stands out as punitive, it is more extensive than school suspension records reveal.

Several police officers also patrolled the hallways of SHS. The school’s code of conduct manual explained that these were off-duty Crane police officers assigned to SHS to “defuse and de-escalate situations” with the students and to generally “provide additional security in the building.” The manual described, that students’ “violent behavior,” or “other criminal behavior in school … may result in a student’s arrest.” The school administration treated the students as a risky population in need of control, whom needed to be guarded by local police officers in addition to surveillance by numerous security guards and administrators.

The school leadership implemented a prison-like school environment, where school professionals and security technology patrolled, punished, and constricted students’ movement as much as possible. This included routinely locking the bathroom and stopping students from using
them when needed. There were extreme instances like what happened to a student named Jesus. Jesus had recently immigrated from Guatemala and was still learning English. He went into the bathroom during class and did not hear the security guard announce that he was locking the bathroom door. As a result, Jesus was locked in the bathroom for the majority of his class. Afterward, upset and panicked, he told me and his teacher what happened but did not feel like he had any additional recourse. This effort to control student misbehavior harmed students in various ways and communicated to them the school thought they could not be trusted.

There were a range of other ways that school securitization taught the students the school suspected them of potential transgressions. According to the students, school administrators were mainly just more security guards. As a student named Raul stated, “They all just do the same thing,” which was guard the students. He explained, the administrator of school safety, “roams the hall harassing students.” He continued that administrators even got into physical altercations with the students, illustrating an incident where they were "Telling some girl to get out of the cafeteria and the girl was not paying attention so she grabbed her by the collar, by the back of her shirt and started dragging her out, and the girl turned around and started hitting her." This made students like Raul feel that the administrators were simply there to punish and harass them. Many students reported similar stories to explain why they did not like school or feel that administrators or security guards made them feel safe.

**School Perceptions: Unsafe.** Nearly all of the Latinx students reported that they attended a dangerous school and were concerned about being the victims of gun violence. Yet, school records showed zero history of gun violence or even altercations with weapons of any kind. In contrast, Black students felt it was a safe place and did not worry about guns at school. As one Black student named Alan stressed, “I wouldn’t come to school if I worried there were guns.” As
immigrants, the Latinx students were immigrant and unfamiliar with attending a highly-
securitized school but nearly all of the Black students were born in the U.S. and they were used
to attending highly securitized schools. Like Shedd (2015) notes, youth of color attending highly
segregated schools are less likely to perceive unjust treatment because they have nothing to
compare it to. In effect, the immigrant youth had a comparison frame. Zero-tolerance discipline
policies, security guards and police officers and anti-gun campaigns at school all sent the
message to the Latinx students that the school was unsafe.

School Lockdowns. SHS used school lockdowns as a safety strategy. A school
administrator would call for it and require that students and staff stayed in their classrooms for a
period of time. As I will show, the students interpreted these episodes differently. Because of the
divergent views, I inquired about school lockdowns with SHS teachers. The teachers agreed that
school lockdowns were not because of violence. As one teacher explained, “Yeah we have
lockdown procedures for different things but nothing because of the kids.” The teachers
described that the lockdowns happened typically because there was a building hazard. One
teacher explained there was a recent lockdown because a transformer had broken, and the school
was temporarily without power. Another teacher recalled that a lockdown had happened because
a student had fallen and there was blood, so the school called for a lockdown in order to clean the
mess and take care of the student.\(^3\)

However, Latinx students regularly cited school lockdowns as evidence that their school
was unsafe. On the other hand, Black youth -- while they did not perceive their school as

\(^3\) There was no official school data available on the number and purpose of lockdowns. However, conversations with
several teachers confirmed they happened with some regularity but were not because of violence in the school, and
rarely because of violence outside the school. Violence-related lockdowns were typically because "something
questionable" happened near the school. No one identified anything specific. Typically, the lockdowns were because
there was a building hazard.
dangerous-- indicated that school lockdowns contributed to a sense of safety at the school. As a Black student named Chloe explained, “[When there is a problem] they put you in a lock-down situation. They take control of the situation.” This interpretation of school lockdowns was in contrast to the view from many Latinx students. As a Latina student named Lupe described, “Our schools’ pretty dangerous, we're having lockdowns… a lot of those stuff happen frequently... we don't know what happened, they don't tell us.” Similarly, Esteban, a Latino student, stated, “When they do a lock down I don’t feel safe. They don’t tell us what is happening.” Latinx students perceived lockdowns happened often, however Black youth did not think it was so much the case.

**Vulnerable Immigration Status and School Discipline.** Undocumented Latinx students also faced some challenges with school discipline due to their undocumented status. It was school policy to threaten families of truant students that SHS would send Child Protective Services (CPS) to their house if their child did not either return to school or officially drop out. Without an official drop date, the students' absences would be counted against the school's quality assessment for the state under SHS's school improvement program. Accordingly, this practice was not directed to bring back wayward students, but rather to coerce them to officially drop out to protect the school's state compliance with student attendance.

The threat of bringing in CPS was a “scare tactic.” It was intended to incite fear in families that the state would tear their families apart if the kids had excessive school absences without officially dropping out of school. I learned about the practice separately from both a school counselor and a teacher. When we spoke about it, they each indicated they were pleased that the school had discovered something that would compel students to either attend or formally drop out of school.
During a discussion of the issue with the school counselor in her office, I saw the list of students’ names in question for missing school. Several of the students listed I knew were undocumented. One of these students was a freshman named Eduardo. He was from Guatemala and had already come out to me as undocumented earlier that school year. I saw him back in school a few weeks later and spoke to him about the CPS threat from the school. When I raised the issue, he uttered a nervous laugh and looked down at his shoes. I decided to explain to him that the school was not actually going to send the government to his house. He looked at me intently as I spoke, then his shoulders relaxed, he nodded, and smiled faintly. Threatening CPS worked so well because it alarmed families that the government was going to come to their house. This practice is also distinctively intimidating for families with vulnerable immigration status. Accordingly, in addition to the security regime at SHS criminalizing the whole student population, it also created additional risks for students with vulnerable immigration status.

Latinxs and school discipline: illegal talk. The punitive systems of school discipline and immigration differently criminalized students and generated sharp tensions among the students. In particular, Latinx students reported what I call, "illegal talk." “Illegal talk” refers to direct and indirect exchanges where students were framed as “illegal” immigrants, unwelcome and unlawful. Illegal talk was used to chastise Latinx students as undeserving citizens, and regularly had little to do with whether or not a student actually had their immigration papers. This practice was racializing because it both reinforced the marginalization of undocumented immigrants as "illegal" people and accused all Latinx students of being undocumented immigrants. Latinx students repeatedly explained that while many of their teachers supported them, other teachers ignored bullying by other students about being “illegal” immigrants and themselves said negative
things about undocumented Latinx immigrants taking “other people's jobs.” They also spoke disparagingly about each other in terms of who is "illegal."

Students and school staff both used and tolerated use of illegal talk in school. One teacher even described the issue candidly, "[The school administrators] think all Latinos are illegal," they stated emphatically. To illustrate, the teacher recounted a time when a Latino student was in trouble for offensive social media posting, he had said he was going to fight someone at school. As a result, the entire administrative body came to his classroom to remove him for discipline. The teacher recounted that this student was told he was "Lucky the administration did not call immigration on him...If we had gone to the police probably at this time you would have been deported already.” The teacher continued, “[To the administrators] the students, all of them are illegal, and just because they look like Latinos.”

Illegal talk was a wide-ranging problem for Latinx students at the school. Rocio, illustrated with a story from her economics class where a student asked the teacher if government-housing subsidies (the topic) were available to students without immigration papers. Several Black students chimed in to confirm that it was a Mexican student who had asked the question. Rocio recalled the conversation, “He was like, ‘Oh, who asked that?’ And the other girl that was sitting next to him was like, ‘Oh that Mexican girl,’ and he was like, ‘Oh that Mexican girl?’ And they started laughing. They were like, ‘Oh yeah, because she needs help, but she don't have papers,’ and everybody started laughing. And that's not funny.” I asked Rocio what the teacher did, and Rocio replied that the teacher did not seem to hear it happen. Rocio explained this was common among the teachers, “I guess they don't hear it, and if they hear, I guess they don't say nothing.” To students like Rocio, teachers' silence affirmed it was acceptable behavior to racialize and shame Latinx students. Like selecting behavior to discipline, inaction also
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informs students what is normal or offensive. In this case, the teacher implicitly affirmed that Latinx students belonged to a class of transgressive people. In effect, “illegal talk” disciplined Latinx students as “illegal immigrants” in the classroom because it was both racialized as Latinx and often tolerated by the teachers.

Rubén came to Crane, New York from Tegucigalpa, Honduras when he was 12. When I met Rubén, he was a high school senior. Rubén was undocumented, but he learned being Latinx in Crane meant he was "illegal." For Rubén, “illegal talk” was something that just happened to “Spanish” people at SHS. As he put it, "When you come to the United States you learn the ‘real life...People discriminate who you are." He explained, “When I go to school programs, they say, 'Latino; they doesn’t have papers.'” Rubén specifically felt shunned by his Black peers on the basis of being Latinx, which was interpreted as undocumented when he tried to participate in school activities. He also described facing threatening “illegal talk” beyond SHS. He illustrated by recounting a time that he was walking down the street on the sidewalk and a Black man started to yell at him from outside the front of his house to get off his street or he would “call immigration” to “deport” him. Rubén learned in school and beyond that Black people assumed Latinxs were undocumented and discriminated against them.

Black students did not tend to share anti-Latinx views with me. Yet, a Black student named Alan shared what Latinx students would likely interpret as offensive. I inquired about his views on the many new Latinx immigrants at SHS. Alan replied, “I think in our school we can make jokes about anything, like you’re an immigrant you ran across the border or make any jokes without altercations happening.” He asserted, “Sometimes they can take offense, but I don't see it really being a problem.” Alan explained, that it was just teasing and not “outright disrespect.” Alan perceived “illegal talk” as both a common practice and comical, even though
he acknowledged that Latinx students found it insulting. Mr. Roberson, a teacher, recounted that there had been “issues” with Black and white students toward the Latinx students, describing that he was aware that the non-Latinx students had often said “negative things about immigrants, [like] ‘go back to your country.’”

**Latinx peers also do illegal talk.** Latinx students *themselves* also used “illegal talk” on each other. As Rocio explained, “Even though we all Spanish,” her Latinx peers still spoke negatively about Latinxs being “illegal.” Yet, she also described that when (the few) Latinx teachers at SHS heard “illegal talk,” they made a big deal about how offensive it was. Rocio explained how her Latinx teacher, “Be like castigándonos por eso” (*punishing us for it*). I also observed “illegal talk” happen in class one day when I was working with a Dominican student named Alma. Diego, a Mexican student, strutted over to Alma and began teasing her that she "swam here"-- a common phrase to suggest that someone was undocumented. In response, Alma glared and rolled her eyes at him and went back to her work.

Although many Mexican students at the school were also undocumented, they insulted and threatened other Latinx immigrant students for being “illegal.” The tension between Latinxs was particularly sharp between Mexican and Central American boys. Mexican youth tended to speak negatively about the Honduran students as a "disrespectful" population. "Disrespectful" was generally the character attack directed at youth by other youth they found to be "criminal," applying it to students with and without papers at the school, immigrant and non-immigrant. As a Mexican student named Martín indicated, "The Mexican community did not welcome [the Hondurans] very nicely." He justified the Mexican students' behavior because "[the Hondurans] would start trying to Casanova, Romeo-ing with the [Mexican] guys’ girls and they did not like it."
Felipe was from Honduras and explained that many Mexicans chastising Honduran and Guatemalan youth for being "ilegales." Jesus, a recent immigrant student from Guatemala, described that the Mexicans discriminated against the Central American students, indicating that they insulted them as immigrants, “Dicen que nosotros somos de otros países.” (They say we are from other countries). Carlos felt similarly, describing with anger that even though Mexican students were also immigrants, they acted like they were not. They insulted him and other Central America students for being immigrants and limited in their English. Felipe specifically illustrated how the Mexican boys at school called him and his Central Americans friends "ilegales" and threatened they would call immigration on them. According to Felipe, peers did “illegal talk” particularly during lunch time, “Si yo quiero, llamo a la Migración para que la venga a traer ustedes.” (If I want I can call Immigration to come and take you guys). Felipe also stated that the reason he thought Mexicans were so cruel to them was that the Central Americans have a chance to stay and they do not. In this analysis, Felipe is demonstrating how immigration policy can provoke ethnic antagonism between different national origin groups.

**Conclusion.** This paper examined how Latinx immigrant youth with vulnerable immigration statuses experienced systems of punishment in both school and their migration pathways. These youth were subjected to the “scrutiny, surveillance, and violence—either physical or symbolic” described by Shedd (2015:40). Yet, their carceral continuum began before they entered their U.S. school and neighborhood with their migration path. Their experiences with school punishment also included added “layers of illegality” such as described by Rios (2017: 154). However, this study also identified new layers, revealing new vulnerabilities for this youth population with the threat of sending Child Protective Services to their homes as well as

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4 Nearly all the Mexican students were foreign-born and most of them were also undocumented according to several of the teachers.
how “illegal talk” and threats of deportation was a dominant discourse at school. This type of symbolic violence even included Latinx peers as a strategy to minimize their own stigma and marginalization. Their immigration status was both vilified and ascribed to Latinx youth. As a result, punitive immigration policies have spilled over into schools and now intersect with other forms of marginalized statuses that Black and Latinx youth experience in school. Extending the carceral continuum framework as presented in this article provides a bridge to understanding the lived experiences of immigrant "illegality" together with existing scholarship how the carceral state is impacting young people’s lives in school.

References


