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Final Draft—Senior Capstone

“The School-to Prison Pipeline: A Path to Nowhere, and the Journey Through Incarceration and Systemic Racism in America”

The focus of my study is to thoroughly examine the infamous School-to Prison Pipeline. This is a disturbing national trend which sees youth being funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these kids have certain learning disabilities or histories of extreme poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would strongly benefit from additional education and counseling/rehabilitative services. Instead, much of America’s youth are isolated, punished, and pushed out of their respective communities. The School-to-Prison Pipeline is a disturbing and prevalent national trend which sees America’s youth being funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Alternative forms of in-school discipline and additional educational resources need to be utilized and applied to these vulnerable areas for students and their families’ sake.

The idea of racism specifically can be traced back to America starting as early as 1865, and has been institutionalized in American society from then, until present day. This prejudicial concept can also be traced back to a period of time before slavery was even established as a system, when European literature began to describe the entire continent of Africa as lustful and overly sexual. This helped institute the very fundamental concept of “black” and/or “blackness.” It is undeniable that this country lived and is still living through a historical period which has seen the exposure and complete loss of liberty and humanity amongst an entire group of people. Institutional and systemic racism can be seen through major examples such as the “War on

Drugs”, the criminal justice system—specifically within the Supreme Court and penal system, modern-day media, and colorblindness amongst mainstream society; all through a lens of mass incarceration and the disenfranchisement of an entire race of human beings. In my opinion, this is the way in which my project is situated within a larger context spanning multiple disciplines.

This topic may appear to be broad on the surface, but it has always been a passionate and highly studied subject of mine. I intend to focus heavily on various subtopics not limited to but including “Restorative Justice in Schools”, (this includes other increasingly layered subtopics such as disproportionate suspension rates in public schools, disciplinary policies, varying levels of resources, the Pipeline’s racial intersection etc.), and the “Bias within the Criminal Justice/Penal Systems.” Again; in short, the School-to Prison Pipeline is a disturbing national trend which sees youth being funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these kids have certain learning disabilities or histories of extreme poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would strongly benefit from additional education and counseling/rehabilitative services. Instead, many of America’s youth are isolated, punished, and pushed out of their respective communities.

This ongoing conversation and topic has been a passion of mine for years and years. I think it is somewhat obvious why this concept has such relevance today. The youth that is being affected throughout all of these tribulations are TODAY’S youth. Nothing could possibly be more important than investing in the next generation. Not only is society detracting from that, but we are residually harming younger generations to come with all of these biased and racist practices. As stated above, I do not have the desire to appear cliché or “cheesy” in any way, but it is my hope and dream to provide a voice to the voiceless. This generation of American youth does not deserved to repeatedly locked up behind bars with no options and proper representation

by their side. That is my main rationale for my project. I have always found myself deeply invested in regard to the larger topic of race and the cultural intersection it has today. In previous courses and in other past coursework, I have examined systemic and institutional racism from a lens of racial bias and inequitable practices specifically regarding law enforcement and the imprisonment of minority youth in America. Taking that even a step further, I have viewed race's intersection with the juvenile/criminal justice and penal systems here in the U.S., and the role in which they play within my larger topic of focus; the School-to-Prison pipeline.

My guiding research question is “How does the school-to-prison pipeline precisely target students and youth of color and subsequently funnel them out of public schools and into the juvenile/criminal justice system, more specifically in urban centers and majority-communities of color?” The sources which I have reviewed all engage in their own individualized perspectives in an attempt to further understand the school-to-prison pipeline and the causes and effects that surround it. This topic refers to an alarming national trend that sees children being funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children suffer from learning disabilities or have histories of poverty, or abuse, or neglect, and would greatly benefit from additional educational and counseling services; access to more lucrative jobs and career placement services. Instead however, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out of their respective communities. It is difficult to pinpoint my exact target audience for my Capstone Project. Anyone who is willing to learn and understand that there are staggering trends and extremely biased patterns regarding minority youth and the school-to-prison pipeline notion should be a part of the prime audience for this project. I continue to envision my project taking on the form of this standard written thesis based on rigid methodology involving research and analysis.

Currently, one in three young African American men will spend time in prison; in some cities, more than half of them are incarcerated, on parole, or on probation. “Each year, an estimated 250,000 children—some not yet in their teens—are prosecuted in adult criminal courts and subjected to the consequences of adult criminal convictions. In addition, 36 states continue to incarcerate youth under 18 in adult jails and prisons, where young people are at greater risk of suicide and physical and sexual assault” (“Youth Incarceration”). Civil rights advocates are mostly devoted to other issues such as affirmative action. The NAACP has made some progress: racial profiling has come under attack in recent years. However, there is no broader movement and the tendency is to treat the criminal justice system like any other institution with lingering racial issues. Many people of color in the U.S. struggle to move up the socioeconomic ladder, and form this subclass of citizens who seem and appear barred from participating in mainstream society. Despite how unfortunate this may seem, it is the harsh reality that we live in today. Many people thought that the election of Barack Obama and the overturning of some state laws regarding mandatory minimums would mean that this subclass of people would begin to fade away.

When a person gets out of jail; whether they are completing their sentence or getting out early, they often lack the critical knowledge necessary to re-enter mainstream society. He or she cannot enlist in the military, buy a firearm, or vote; and most likely cannot obtain federally-backed health and welfare benefits, food stamps, public housing, or education assistance services. All of these factors essentially guarantee that the person who has served time in prison will never be able to enter mainstream society again. I believe that the first key issue comes down to housing. If people have no one to stay with and nowhere to go, or even if they do but cannot seem to reconnect with family or friends, it is hard to find a place to call home. In the

Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1998, “public housing agencies do not need to exercise discretion if a tenant or a tenant’s guest engages in criminal activity.” They can develop their own standards for prohibiting guests and deny housing eligibility for even the most minor offenses. They abide by this “One Strike and You’re Out” policy, but this becomes troublesome for tenants who did not even know that subsequent criminal activity was occurring (such as a mom being evicted because her daughter was in possession of cocaine a few blocks from home for example). These families are extremely vulnerable and have nowhere to go and as a result, thousands of innocent people end up homeless and on the streets.

My ideas have evolved and changed immensely since the beginning of the research process. Originally, I wanted to utilize my main focus towards the “pipeline” itself, identifying it’s victims who are caught in its dangerously cyclical nature and those responsible for such a disparaging pattern occurring throughout the entire nation. Now, however, I have decided to focus on some remedies or alternatives for youth caught up in the risky crosshairs of society and the challenges that come with growing up in what tend to be low-income minority communities with jobs disappearing and therefore a lack of outlets for minority youth in America. “In addition to the growing body of research supporting the benefits of alternative campus discipline programs, there is now federal pressure for districts to rethink their practices: schools may face sanctions if discipline policies are found to unfairly target minority students. That is a significant milestone, said attorney Thena Robinson-Mock of the Advancement Project, a national civil-rights organization” (Richmond). The key example in this case is something called Restorative Justice—an alternative to traditional “zero-tolerance” policies implemented in public schools and something that provides a chance for kids to reflect on their various behaviors and the impact that they had on them personally, and on other affected individuals. Something as simple as

providing a true outlet for these kids seems so far-fetched but could be so useful across the board, if implemented properly and in good time.

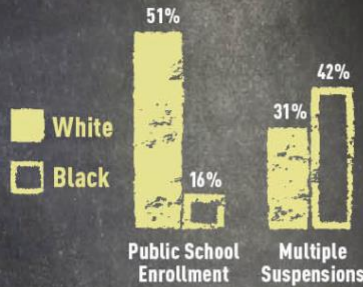
Discussion/Adding to the Conversation

When students get into trouble at school or at a school-sponsored activity, typical forms of discipline often lead to more trouble; this is an undisputable fact. Throughout the previous two decades, zero tolerance suspension policies have trolled education systems spanning from New York to California. As a valid example, between 1999 and 2009, the number of student suspensions in New York City nearly doubled under these baffling policies, reaching almost half a million suspensions over the course of just one decade (Dominus). It was clearly demonstrated that suspending a student from school further alienated he or she from within the academic community. In addition, it also signified that students of color were more likely than white students to be suspended for the same, or similar behaviors, thus emerging as an inequitable practice (Dominus). This issue is truly meaningful and relevant to the school-to-prison pipeline because it highlights a major area for improvement, all in an attempt to sustain and engage in more productive and constructive communication regarding this unique and extremely layered national issue/topic of conversation.

SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

School disciplinary policies disproportionately affect Black students.

Zero-tolerance discipline has resulted in Black students facing disproportionately harsher punishment than white students in public schools.¹



Black students represent



31%

of school-related arrests²

Black students are suspended and expelled

3x

more than white students.³



Students suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are nearly three times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.⁴



BROWN AT 60: STILL SEPARATE. STILL UNEQUAL.



¹ Data Snapshot: <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CROC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>
² *Ibid.*
³ *Ibid.*
⁴ Breaking School Rules http://cagjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Breaking_School_Rules_Report_Final.pdf

“Suspensions do not deter bad behavior, numerous studies have found, and most likely feed it by alienating students from the school community. Other studies show that suspensions are not just ineffective but inequitable, as students of color are more likely than white ones to be suspended for the same behaviors. In New York City, black students made up only 30 percent of all students from 1999 to 2009 but accounted for 50 percent of the suspensions, according to a N.Y.C.L.U. report” (Dominus). For the past two decades, how to discipline students has been as hotly contested a subject as how to educate them. For much of that time, many public-school systems, including New York City’s, have enforced zero-tolerance policies that require mandatory suspensions for certain offenses. Originally generated in response to fears about weapons in schools, zero-tolerance policies, especially in New York, where Rudolph W. Giuliani’s “broken windows” theory had taken hold, signaled to educators that crackdowns on unruliness of all kinds were in order.

Numerous studies proved that a student who had been suspended would be more likely to eventually drop out of school or end up in the criminal-justice system, also known as by many as the “school-to-prison” pipeline (Dominus). I think that this is where the very notion of restorative justice; especially as seen when applied in academic environments, actually originates from. However, this idea would not be easily implemented, as there could not possibly be a wider contrast between restorative justice and zero tolerance policies that currently remain in place at many higher institutions, including even colleges. Restorative justice’s roots lie within certain values such as community, empathy, and responsibility; while more specifically calling for teachers and students to strengthen their relationships amongst each other, and settle any issues they may have by sitting together in circles and giving each individual an opportunity to speak about how a given incident affected him or her (Dominus). The basic principle of

language plays a key role in this discussion as a whole. A huge amount of emphasis was placed on how the use of language that set a more welcoming tone, as opposed to a punitive tone, truly resulted in a more positive and productive set of dialogue and discourse between the teacher and the student (Dominus).

The process of implementing these restorative justice practices is not always a seamless transition by any means. The main shift in terms of disciplining students required teachers to rethink the concept of justice in its entirety, now all of the sudden having to reject a model of punishment in which most of these educators were trained and even raised as children themselves. This proves to be a gigantic challenge and the conceptual change can even become an obstacle in some instances (Davis). “Moreover, the whole thing gives you pause to wonder, whatever happened to the social contract between teacher and parent in public schools? Black, white or whatever, we send our kids on good faith to the cherished institution of school, hoping that they will exit the experience fully qualified for the rigors of a sophisticated, ever changing world. We don’t tend to think of school as the problem itself” (Reynolds). Some teachers simply believed that this method of confronting issues was asking too much of them with their current workloads as it already stands. While some other educators felt that the new change empowered students just a bit too much to the point where they were feeling overly comfortable in class, and felt as though they could take advantage of the teacher, or even just the situation in general (Richmond).

Even though at many schools only a few students relative to the entire student body can enroll in restorative justice classes or workshops, the curriculum for restorative justice could relate to and be absorbed by all students through the models of stress-coping, listening, and empathizing; or in other words, trying to prevent and attempting to combat the motivation behind

the start of a confrontation before it even occurs (Richmond). This empathy-based approach has helped lower suspension rates, improve graduation rates, and improve overall school atmosphere (Dominus). In cities such as San Francisco and New York City, restorative-practice training has begun and it is available for all educators, no matter what their position at the institution may be (Richmond).

In conventional school-discipline programs, students face a more punitive method of enforcement and there is a gradual scale of punishments that may actually end up resulting in an expulsion from the school. This has become a much more old-fashioned approach, and there is even new data and research which continues to prove that removing students from the classroom as punishment can deter that student from pursuing their long-term academic ambitions (Dominus). Furthermore, the same data shows that the punishments are often handed out unequally and inconsistently; while nationally, the results of this data indicate how much more black students are suspended compared to white students (Richmond). This is truly the reason why there has been such an added emphasis placed on alternative programs such as restorative justice.

“Moving Beyond Retribution: Alternatives to Punishment in a Society Dominated by the School-to-Prison Pipeline”, is a fascinating journal article yields a distinctive perspective into addressing the school-to-prison pipeline from a slightly increased macro point of view. The authors examine how students are simply a necessity to fill a role as members of this horrific national trend, instead of becoming valued members to the adult and academic communities. Interestingly, the authors use the “American Dream” as a prime example of something that these students are never granted the opportunity to pursue.

This subsequent article is valuable to my research because it offers a macro-analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline and examines the very notion of how there is a blatant injustice happening within our school system, places that should ironically be safe havens for our children; places that should be a source of knowledge and a means of escape for children who have already been failed by the system itself. The main purpose of the article stays true to the beliefs that I have in terms of attempting to convey the urgency of this crisis and exposing the detailed ways in which our youth are repeatedly stifled by this systematic injustice. “The school-to-prison pipeline cannot and does not exist in a vacuum: it is deeply connected to our current political and social climate which is increasingly harsh and interested in punitive punishment rather than understanding. It is also tied to neoliberal ideas of restoration which reactively seek to offer forms of “justice” instead of *proactively* combating the mass prison industrial complex through complete deconstruction of both the education and carceral systems. We see this through well-intended efforts of rehabilitation seen both in and out of the classroom. Can we imagine a justice system that prioritizes recovery and rehabilitation over retribution in a mass prison industrial complex without replicating ideologies of destructive neoliberalism? Our society depends on truly transforming our education and justice systems to move out of this time of crisis so that the hierarchy of lives can be rethought” (Miguel and Gargano). The article adds to the pouring amount of support and contributes to the conversation for this increasingly relevant societal issue.

The unique point of view it takes on in relation to the school-to-prison pipeline is one of critical thinking and bright analysis. The authors suggest that the public education system in the U.S. is supposed to be one of the great equalizers amongst our society, one that can lead literally anyone to achieve the American Dream. However, this appears to be a false narrative; the public

education system has caused even more vast divisions between socioeconomic classes and singles out those who are “worthy” of a *good* education, and those who are not. Rather than fostering an atmosphere of understanding, learning, collaboration, and limitless opportunity, current school-based practices and educational models have increasingly blurred the lines between school and jail more than ever before. In addition, the authors make it evidently clear when suggesting that entering the school-to-prison pipeline is not by “random chance.”

Another valuable example of restorative justice being utilized in an academic setting is in Pittsfield, New Hampshire. In 2009, it was rated as one of New Hampshire’s weakest school systems and there was a massive desire to create change within this academic environment (Richmond). Pittsfield began engaging in what is referred to as a “student-centered learning environment”, where the students get to dictate how and when they learn, and are highly encouraged to participate in their fields of interest through internships and project-based learning (Richmond). The school’s main goal is to carry that same sense of learning, adaptability, and flexibility to campus discipline. Pittsfield’s justice committee for example, is responsible for handling lower-level offenses and is made up of student mediators, school administrators, and teachers who assist as advisors (Richmond). The outcome of the justice committee is to provide a “non-confrontational forum for students to talk through their problems, address their underlying reasons for their own behaviors, and make amends both to individuals who have been affected as well as to the larger school community” (Davis). This methodology illustrates a much more comprehensive and structured approach to delegating on-campus discipline, and not only does it help educate students about what conflict resolution really means, but it also helps reinforce student’s critical social-emotional skills (Richmond). Generally speaking, it helps improve the overall communication in student to student or student to teacher interactions and as

a result a more collaborative and positive experience will emerge out of a possible confrontation. Maybe even more importantly though, students at Pittsfield can finally begin the process of developing empathy for their peers as well as building their trust and understanding of one another (Richmond). This aspect is absolutely vital for the preservation of the student's academic experience, especially within a high school environment itself.

At Pittsfield, justice-committee meetings are held with students and teachers/mediators in a room where everyone forms a big circle. The expectations are that only one person will speak at a time, and interruptions will be heavily discouraged (Richmond). The committee allows all parties involved in the case to speak, and this process is initially begun outside of the meeting where the committee compile a small agenda for each session including questions that the involved parties will have to respond to (Richmond). They try enormously to not make the environment increasingly structured with the hopes that it will increase eye contact between students and other participants. These subtle details play a much more significant role within the school-to-prison pipeline, as the slightest change in a physical expression can boost the results and productiveness of the intervention (Davis). This process as we analyze it further, proves to indeed be more deliberate and thoughtful than the typical process of simply handing out punishments. In student-teacher cases, which tend to be more complicated usually, the staff member can choose whether to participate in the full committee or to speak with the student in a more private setting (Davis). For students actually serving on the committee themselves, they claimed that by participating in the discussion circles, they were able to become better critical listeners, and gain mindfulness about their own personal behaviors both inside and outside of school (Dominus).

While restorative justice programs are becoming more prevalent and are proving to be

successful around the country, the use of them may not be warranted in every environment. In certain instances for example, if the program is implemented poorly it can lead to many situations becoming worse in the future. Since these alternative programs are growing in popularity, many school districts are jumping at the opportunity to start installing them into their institutions (Davis). Policy analyst Andrew Rotherham of Bellwether Education Partners, claims that “restorative justice has become a hot issue and everyone wants to do it—but it may not be what every school needs.” Clearly, restorative justice programs and the broader ideals it is centered around as a whole, should really only be applied to schools and other institutions on a case-by-case basis. It was also noted that before implementing a restorative justice model, school’s must first address “campus-climate” issues that contribute to student behavior (Dominus). In places such as Pittsfield, educators have a head start because student-centered learning is a priority there, however, restorative justice can be just as beneficial in various types of campus environments (Davis).

Finally, this new system has begun to thrive as the transition from a discipline system which removes students from the school, to one that aspires to assist them in becoming peaceful and valued citizens in society is becoming ever more prevalent throughout the country. Many teachers are even beginning to utilize the model in their own individual classrooms (Richmond). With restorative justice practices in place, relationships can be restored, students and teachers can actually own up to their actions, and it can really become something that the whole academic culture is centered around and be something that everyone can buy into. With these alternative programs in place, we have seen a dramatic decrease in school-discipline issues, improved climates on campuses all over the country, and even major progress in student achievement (Davis). I think it’s extremely critical to note that in order to put this new system in place, it

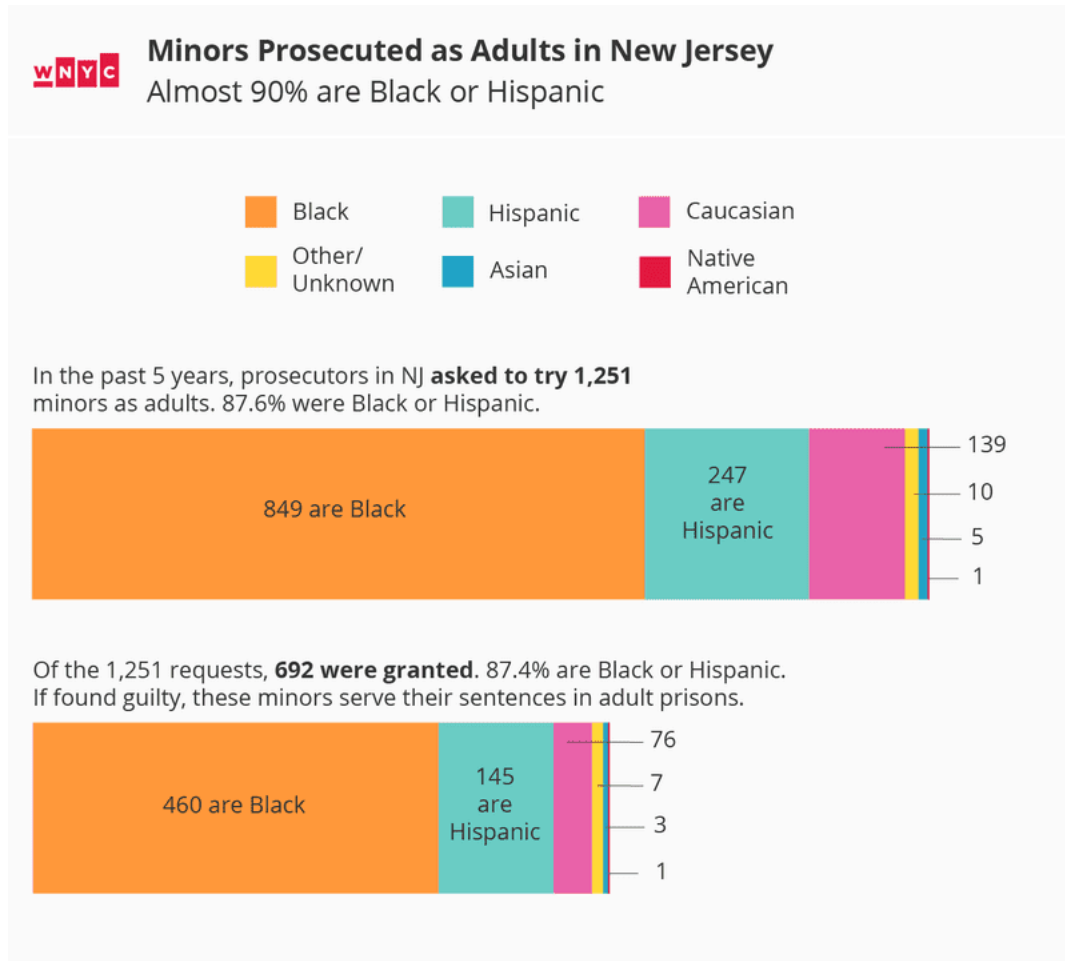
requires a balanced involvement between educators, students, and parents or other guardian figures. Cooperation by just one of these groups will not lead to a successful transition towards widespread use of restorative justice. It remains increasingly notable how race became such a centerpiece of this issue. Educators and administrators have been forced to open-up and confront racial issues that contribute to the failure of zero-tolerance policies. Race plays such a vital role in almost every aspect of our society today, that we cannot ignore the harsh realities of racial tension and racial bias that takes place, especially within our system of education. This has such a noticeable impact on student-teacher relationships, and the trust that goes along with having peaceful and substantive relations with students and those that are supposed to be their role-models, continues to be very evident in society today.

Concluding Thoughts

This topic obviously engages in tremendous overlap regarding law and legislation concerning people who are very similar to myself in age. I believe the evidence regarding this topic is overwhelming, yet the progress made to remedy this major issue has been slim. As cliché as it might sound, I want to see change. Even if this societal issue takes me towards a career path in which I may not have envisioned I would pursue originally, I would be satisfied with that. This topic and issue genuinely lives close to my heart, and I could think of no better way to encapsulate such a concept than in my senior thesis.

I want my audience to take away one main point (if I had to truly narrow it down to one), and that is how we are seriously jeopardizing the well-being of the younger generation by leading them down a path that only has one door, and that door is to prison. It is unjust, unprecedented, and not what this country stands for. We should have the general desire to better

the youth in our society, not lead them down a path that has no adequate exit.



In terms of the capstone project explicitly, I really did not know much of anything in the very early stages of discovering and finding a topic/subject of interest. I thought the topic selection would have more rigid guidelines, making us (the capstone students) choose from a select list of topics, all of which would have been pre-approved by the professor and the department. Little did I know that the capstone project could be whatever I wanted it to be. For me, this capstone project was an opportunity to expand on past coursework and research, sure; but what genuinely made me excited to begin this journey was knowing that I could research a

topic and complete a project regarding a topic that wasn't 100 percent centered around my major and field of study.

The other assignments such as the annotated bibliography and research proposal have been extremely helpful in terms of channeling all of my ideas into a clearer and more concise message or theme throughout my project. They have acted like "stepping stones" along this journey of writing and research and have made the eventual end result of this product seem more achievable and there for the taking. Peer reviews, the help received from the librarians, and conferences have all assisted me tremendously throughout this process allowing me to further develop my ideas and strive for the final product of this project and research.

The biggest challenge for me has been controlling and organizing my ideas. I deliberately chose a topic for this project that I am constantly thinking on a daily basis. As a result, whenever an idea pops into my head I literally scramble to write it down and make a note of it. I also feel as though I am thinking about the project too much, simply in the sense that there's too much knowledge regarding this topic running through my mind at once to properly synthesize and assess the information altogether.

Just as I mentioned above, something that has been a challenge for me has also been advantageous simultaneously. I am constantly jotting down notes regarding my research, or just my topic in general and I try to make note of every idea that comes to mind, even if in the moment it seems miniscule. I think I have struggled at times with just the vast amount of information that is readily available regarding my topic. A lot of prior research has been in support of my point of view that I am expressing, so I have been trying to assure myself that I am not simply regurgitating past research but bringing forth a new and fresh perspective. Equally as important is the fact that I am truly doing this project on a topic of my choice and one that I am

adamantly passionate about. The passion I have for this issue is what genuinely drives me to produce the best possible project and end result that I can. Most importantly though, I am truly hopeful that my work can shed some light on a horrific trend and something that will define the decades to come if it is not addressed.

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