

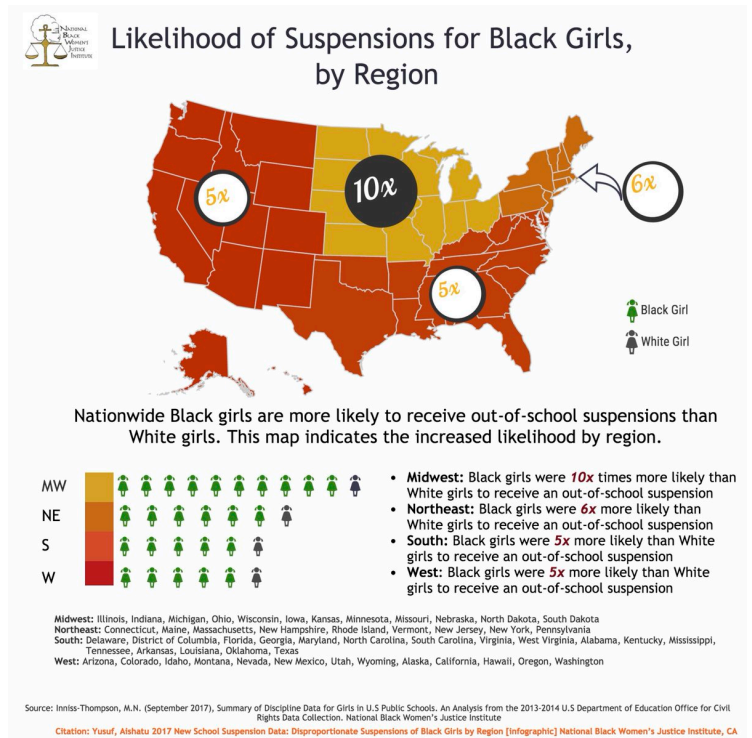


**Policy Brief: The Miseducation of Black Girls—Undoing Harmful Educational Practices and Creating Safer, More Inclusive Schools for ALL**

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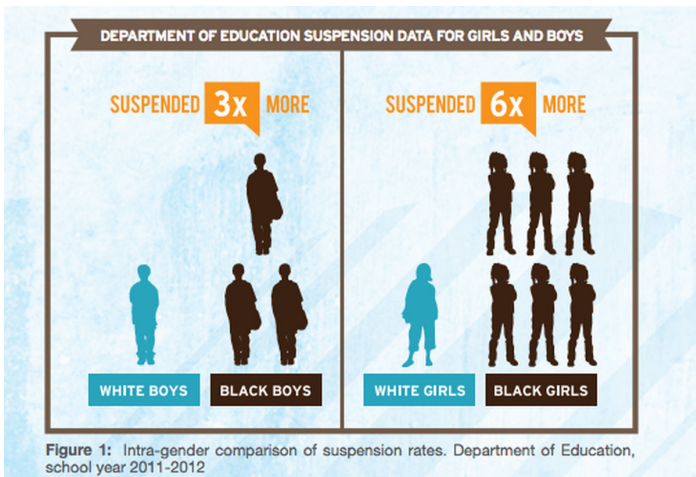
School safety has been a major focal point in the field education for more than two decades as a direct reaction to school shootings and gun violence in the US. While educators envisioned protecting students and creating safer school environments, much of the focus remained on discipline leading to the rise of zero-tolerance policies, the use of harsher disciplinary methods and the implementation of extreme security measures like the use of metal detectors and the presence of school resource officers (SROs), particularly in schools with greater proportions of African-American students, in urban inner-cities.<sup>1</sup>

Although most students disciplined through zero-tolerance policies have been first-time nonviolent offenders,<sup>2</sup> punishments are harsh and consequences damaging. Millions of students have found themselves being pushed out of schools and into the juvenile justice system—students of color taking the hardest hit.



Much of the research and policy debates on the school-to-prison pipeline center its impact on boys or Black students generally, overlooking the realities of the particular disproportionate disciplining of Black girls, who in some regions of the US, are ten times more likely to be suspended than white girls<sup>3</sup>—a rate that exceeds even that of Black boys to white boys.

Now, decades after radically enforcing these policies, educators are beginning to realize the extent of the damage done by them, and a wave of new strategies is becoming widely popularized—restorative justice practices and positive behavioral interventions and supports.



Source: Crenshaw K. W., Ocen, P., & Nanda, J. (2015). Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced and underprotected, 17.

Although this positive, rehabilitative stance is steps up from previous punitive measures, it still does not address **the root of a much larger issue for Black girls in schools—implicit and explicit biases based on racist and sexist stereotypes.** Thus, it is critical for school leaders to re-examine what school safety truly means and who has been left out of the conversation. This policy brief details the ways in which educational practices have been harmful to Black girls and how school leaders can work to undo this damage and provide safer and more inclusive school environments for them and all students.

### Policy Recommendations

To address the implicit and explicit biases of school personnel and improve school safety, several policies can be implemented by K-12 school leaders.

- **As a whole school/district,** school leaders can re-evaluate the language, structure and purpose of codes and policies, and collect and monitor data on disciplinary patterns.
- **To support instructional staff and school personnel,** school leaders can provide cultural competence and gender responsiveness training along with a diverse range of resources that portray Black girls positively and reflect their literacies.
- **In supporting Black girls in schools,** school leaders can form partnerships with community organizations to establish mentorship programs and school clubs.
- **For new teacher and instructional support hires,** school leaders can collaborate with stakeholders in the interviewing processes and actively recruit teachers of color.

### Problematic Policies and Practices

Many school leaders believe that the language and terms of their school policies and codes are fair, general, and “race-neutral.”<sup>5</sup> **Racial biases within policies are not always easily identifiable, however, that doesn’t negate their existence.**

A school policy that bans the wearing of braids, for example, has pretty explicit racial and cultural implications, as braids are a common hairstyle within Black culture. Disciplining students for wearing braids, therefore, may be denying them access into their own cultural identity at school. This was the case for 15-year-old African-American twin sisters, Deanna and Maya Cook who were repeatedly penalized by their Massachusetts’ school for wearing their hair in braids in 2017. The school’s dress code policy prohibits extensions, which resulted in the twins facing multiple hours of detention, suspension, and exclusion from sports teams and activities, prom, and clubs, not to mention the psychological toll that this form of exclusion and discrimination has taken on them.

The language in school policies is often vague and subjective. Using words like “disrespectful,” “inappropriate,” “disobedient,” and “disruptive” leave much to be interpreted. If the interpreter is not culturally competent and gender responsive, it is extremely likely that a student can be misread and therefore punished unfairly. As 80% of America’s teacher are white, the odds are not in favor of Black girls.

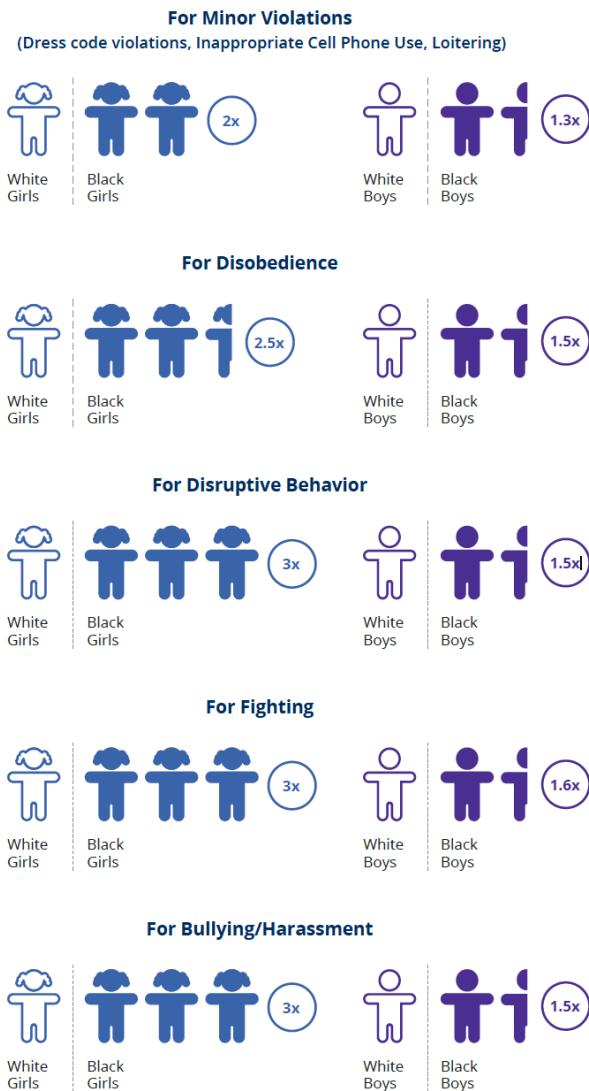
### The State of Black Girlhood in Schools

While school violence has decreased over the last few years, **schools themselves have not become safer institutions,** especially not for students of color. Zero-tolerance policies coupled with harsh exclusionary discipline practices have turned schools into prison-like institutions.

Even though males are suspended from school in greater numbers than females overall, race and ethnicity are quite substantial risk factors for Black girls when they are compared to their white counterparts.<sup>6</sup> In the 2013-2014 school year, Black girls represented 16% of the student population, but 52% of girls suspended multiple times and 37% of girls arrested at school.<sup>7</sup> Particularly in preschool, Black girls made up

20% of female enrollment, but 54% of female children receiving one or more out-of-school suspension.<sup>8</sup> Black girls with disabilities are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended than white girls with disabilities.<sup>9</sup> Overall, Black girls are more likely than any other race or gender to be suspended more than once.<sup>10</sup> Critical to acknowledge is the fact that **these disproportionate discipline rates are not due to more frequent or more serious misbehavior.**<sup>11</sup>

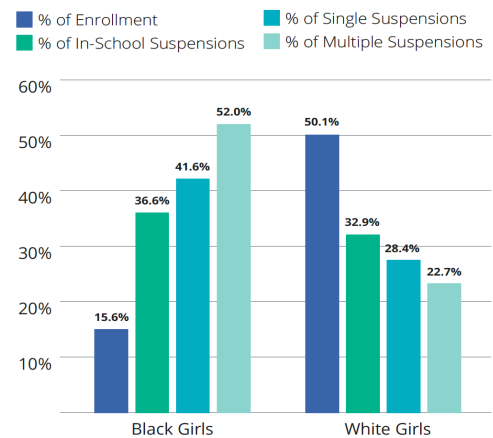
### Black Girls Are More Likely to Be Disciplined for Subjective Infractions\*



\* Note: This study was conducted in one school district in Kentucky

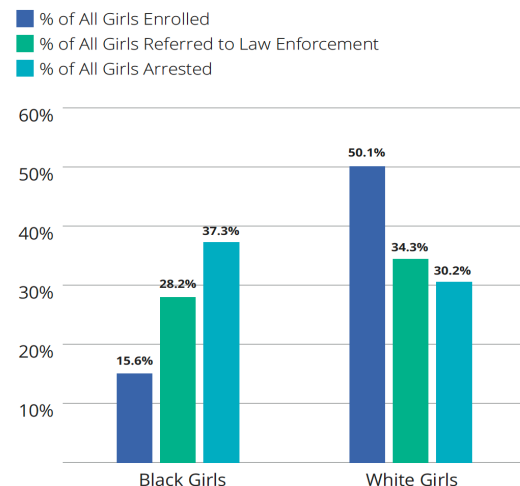
Source: Edward W. Morris & Brea L. Perry, *Girls Behaving Badly? Race, Gender, & Subjective Evaluation in the Discipline of Af. Am. Girls*, 90 SOCIOLOGY OF EDUC. 127 (2017).

### Rates of Suspensions for Girls in K-12 in the 2013-2014 School Year by Race



Source: NAT'L WOMEN'S LAW CTR., STOPPING SCHOOL PUSHOUT FOR GIRLS OF COLOR 15 fig.6 (2017).

### Percentage of Girls Referred to Law Enforcement or Arrested at School in the 2013-14 School Year by Race



Source: NAT'L WOMEN'S LAW CTR., STOPPING SCHOOL PUSHOUT FOR GIRLS OF COLOR 13 fig.5 (2017).

This overrepresentation of Black girls' exclusionary discipline is a clear indicator that ideologies, perceptions, and policies criminalize them in schools.<sup>12</sup> The implicit racial and gender biases of Black girls as being loud, angry, unruly, aggressive, attitudinal, defiant, and promiscuous contradict teachers' and school leaders' racialized, classed, and gendered constructions of femininity, and therefore, influence their interpretations of girls' behaviors in school as acceptable or deviant.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, many of the characteristics that Black girls embody in schools, and are penalized for, are actually traits indicative of academic success and achievement:<sup>14</sup>

- Assertiveness
- Independence
- Resilience
- Free expressiveness
- Boldness

So why, then, are Black girls not praised for these traits? Negative portrayals of Black girls and women in the media validate outsiders' perceptions of them in the real world, and with only 7% of America's teacher workforce and 10% of its principals being Black,<sup>15</sup> it is not shocking that Black girls are misread and punished at disproportionate rates. Individuals who lack a solid sense of cultural competence and gender responsiveness often either *rely* on these media representations to establish an understanding of unfamiliar cultures or they *subconsciously internalize* these representations as generalizable group characteristics instead of seeing them as the harmful stereotypes they are. Either way, without confronting and addressing these biases, teachers and school leaders will continue to enact harmful and exclusionary practices against Black girls.

The realities of "Black girl pushout,"<sup>16</sup> defined by Monique W. Morris as "a collection of policies, practices, and consciousness that fosters

invisibility, marginalizes [Black girls'] pain and opportunities, and facilitates their criminalization,"<sup>17</sup> are influenced by three major factors: 1) zero-tolerance policies and surveillance measures, 2) the policing of their bodies as criminals, and 3) penalizing "bad" girl attitudes.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Black girls have been reportedly "pushed-out of schools and treated like criminals for:

- Falling asleep,
- Standing up for themselves,
- Asking questions,
- Wearing natural hair,
- Wearing revealing clothing,
- And engaging in unruly (although not criminal or delinquent) acts in school."<sup>19</sup>

While exclusionary school discipline policies, which are integral to US policing technologies,<sup>20</sup> have often created harmful conditions for Black girls, treating them as captives being constantly watched but simultaneously "denied access to their humanity, including rights and privileges over their own lives and bodies,"<sup>21</sup> they are not the only platform within schools wherein the exclusion of Black girls persists. Academically, gifted Black girls are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as well as gifted and talented and advanced placement classes.<sup>22</sup> Many possess unique skills in these areas and are highly capable, but if their gifts and talents go unnoticed by middle school, they begin to lose confidence in their academic abilities. To put it into perspective, Black girls are underrepresented by almost 40% in gifted education, and "underachievement is all, but guaranteed for many unidentified gifted students of color as they lose interest in school from being underchallenged."<sup>23</sup> Because gifted and talented classes are selected based on teacher recommendations, if implicit and explicit biases are in the way, Black girls will easily be disregarded and overlooked academically.



## **The Costs: Understanding the Effects and Implications**

**The cost of zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline** oftentimes far exceeds the infraction, and it certainly exceeds the punishment itself. When students are excluded from school, their psychological engagement drastically decreases, they feel alienated, they develop low educational expectations, and they experience doubts about graduating.<sup>24</sup> School disengagement can then lead to poor choices and delinquent behaviors. School suspension increases the likelihood of students becoming involved with the juvenile justice system,<sup>25</sup> and being supervised by the courts increases the risk for being held in detention facilities, for being incarcerated, and for recidivism.<sup>26</sup> Oftentimes, students don't receive educational services during periods of suspension or expulsion, setting them back academically<sup>27</sup> and placing them at greater risk for failure, grade retention, and dropping out.<sup>28</sup> Dropping out of high school increases the risk of lifetime incarceration more than threefold, and even without an adult incarceration experience, juvenile delinquency can prohibit obtaining student loans, enrolling in the military, and receiving public or subsidized housing.<sup>29</sup>

**The cost of excessive surveillance** in schools, even when well-planned architecturally, harms the learning environment by evoking negative reactions, fears, worries, and even resentment in students, making the cohesion of schools and their student bodies more fragile. Further, and ironically, it contributes to, evokes, and increases negative student behaviors.<sup>30</sup>

**The cost of school resource officers** similarly doesn't add up. Their presence in schools has increased student arrests annually from 300% to 500% since the reign of zero-tolerance policies, most commonly for minor offenses.<sup>31</sup>

The cost of ignoring the disproportionality of **Black girls' exclusion** from school has serious implications for their life chances and well-being. Girls who are suspended from school are more inclined to drop out. Particularly for Black and Latina girls, dropping out of school increases the likelihood of low-wage work and unemployment. A 2015 Black Girls Matter report suggests that "the income gap between dropouts and high school graduates is greater for women than it is for men. Given the economic dependence of so many Black children on a female wage earner, Black girls dropping out of high school is of critical socioeconomic concern."<sup>32</sup>

The report also noted particular factors that contributed to Black girls' detachment from schools, which included the following:

- Doubts about the relevance of the curricula and their teachers' cultural competence
- Poor physical conditions of schools
- Violence, harassment, and abusive experiences within schools
- Perceptions of unfair policies and disinterested teachers
- Lack of effective counseling, conflict resolution, and problem-solving interventions
- Absence of academic support and appropriate incentives to complete school
- Threat of psychological and physical abuse within schools and community

**The cost of failing to address implicit and explicit biases** in schools is the perpetuation of the aforementioned harmful practices and detrimental outcomes for Black girls and for society as a whole. The cost is Black girls' safety, well-being, inclusion, futures, and self-concepts. The cost is a world without their brilliance, creativity, and passion. That cost is far too great.

## Safe and Inclusive School Environments

What is exceptionally clear is the **critical need for school leaders to re-evaluate and restructure school environments that are particularly harmful to Black girls**. By amending the language and terms of school codes, school leaders can ensure that racial and gender biases have no place in their policies. By mandating and participating in ongoing professional development trainings focused on anti-bias, gender responsiveness, and cultural competence, school leaders can begin the work of culturally responsive leadership and instruction. By reducing the presence and role of SROs, school leaders can send the message that discipline and intervention are the responsibility of school officials, not police officers. By reducing the use of extreme surveillance, school leaders can make schools look and feel more like schools, and less like prisons. By actively recruiting more teachers of color, school leaders can work to close the gap of the percentage of teachers of colors to students of color, who are the growing majority in US schools today. By establishing a data collection team to record and analyze patterns of school discipline and achievement, school leaders can actively evaluate the safety, effectiveness and progress of their schools.

## Recommendations

To address the implicit and explicit biases of school personnel and improve school safety, several policies can be implemented by K-12 school leaders.

- **Review and revise school and district policies** (code of conduct, dress code, discipline policy, etc.) with teachers, students and families to ensure the reduction of ambiguities and subjective language and promote fair policies.
- **Establish a data collection team** to conduct an annual analysis of school incidents, interventions, and supports and note any patterns.

- **Mandate ongoing cultural competence and gender responsiveness trainings** and professional development opportunities for all school personnel (including SROs) at least twice per school year.
- **Provide a diverse range of instructional resources** that uplift the stories and experiences of Black girls with positive portrayals promoting their literacies.
- **Create affinity spaces** within schools for Black girls to share their experiences, thoughts, and concerns freely and engage in meaningful dialogue and mentorship with faculty and community groups.
- **Actively recruit teachers of color** and other school personnel of color who are familiar with the local community.
- **Examine teacher preparation program requirements** for cultural competency and anti-bias courses and trainings when considering new teachers for hire.
- **Involve students, families, and community members** in the interviewing and hiring processes of teachers and other school personnel.

## Conclusion

When conceptualizing school safety, the violence that schools unknowingly commit on students is often overlooked, but as the saying goes, “when you know better, you do better.” Understanding the harm that many educational institutions have evoked on Black girls through the enactment of implicit and explicit racial and gender biases requires immediate attention and action. All students deserve to feel safe, valued, and validated in school, and it’s time to show Black girls that they matter, too.

## Author Affiliations

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## Notes

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