

SCHOOL REFORM & DROPOUT PREVENTION

Addressing Disparities in Discipline for African American Girls



African American Girls Experience Harsher, More Frequent School Discipline

Black girls are suspended and expelled from school at higher rates than other girls. In the 2011-12 school year, 12% of all African American girls in grades pre-K–12 were suspended from school—six times the rate of white girls and higher than the rate for any other group of girls, and white, Latino, and Asian American boys.¹

Schools suspend African American girls more often than they suspend white girls for minor offenses like dress code violations, or subjective offenses like “defiance” or “disobedience.” For example, an Ohio study showed that for behavior labeled as “disobedient or disruptive,” 16.3% of African American girls received out-of-school suspensions and 10% received in-school suspensions. In comparison, the rates for white girls were just 1.5% and 1.9%, respectively, even though Black girls are only a small fraction of Ohio’s student population. For the same offenses, Black girls more often received out-of-school suspension and white girls got in-school suspension. African American girls also are more likely than white girls to be suspended from school for fighting.

Because of such severe and frequent discipline, African American girls spend more time out of the classroom, which contributes to poor academic performance, increased dropout rates, and higher representation in the juvenile justice system. In 2009-10 African American girls represented less than 17% of all female students, but 31% of girls referred to law enforcement by schools and 43% of girls who experienced a school-related arrest.² And despite an overall drop in juvenile delinquency cases from 1996 to 2011, girls’ share of delinquency cases increased; among females, the share of cases that involved Black girls went up while white girls’ share declined.³

Gender and race stereotypes underlie disparate discipline rates of African American girls, while the impact of trauma is overlooked. Stereotypes of Black women as “hyper-sexualized” and aggressive may contribute to the implicit bias underlying many educators’ views of African American girls, who are more likely than white girls to be penalized for behaviors that challenge our society’s expectations of what is appropriate “feminine” behavior.

For example, Black girls who complain about sexual harassment may be labeled as aggressors. Black girls who are assertive and speak up in class may be labeled as “loud” or showing “attitude.” Behavior that is labeled as “defiant” may in fact be a predictable response to unaddressed trauma or mental health issues. Punishing girls for such behavior instead of providing them with services and support fails to change the behavior or improve their engagement in school.

How Policymakers Can Stop the Unfair Discipline of African American Girls

- ✓ Require accurate annual public reporting of school discipline data that can be analyzed by race, sex, disability, type of offense, and length of sanction.
- ✓ Implement positive behavior interventions and culturally-responsive supports, social and emotional learning, peer mediation, conflict resolution, and restorative justice practices as alternatives to punitive discipline practices and police in schools, which are shown to negatively impact African American girls through increased arrests, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and lost learning time.
- ✓ Train school personnel to recognize the signs of trauma that may underlie behaviors perceived as “defiant” or “disrespectful” and to support students impacted by violence or trauma without re-victimizing them.

1 CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION, U.S. DEPT OF EDUC. OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, ISSUE BRIEF NO. 1, DATA SNAPSHOT: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE 3 (2014), available at <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>.

2 National Women’s Law Center calculations based on U.S. Department of Education, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2009-10 National and State Estimations, National total, <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/downloads/projections/2009-10/2009-10-Estimations-Nation.xls>. Discipline data are for students without disabilities.

3 National Women’s Law Center calculations based on M. Sickmund, A. Sladky, & W. Kang, Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1985-2011 (2014), <http://www.ojdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>.