

**The Secret Epidemic: The History of Black Girls and the Intersectionality  
With the Criminal Justice and Education Systems**

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**I am presenting to you...**

- **Why did I choose this? Why is this important in the field of Social Work?**
- **Research Questions and Hypothesis**
- **Key Terms**
- **History of Racial Disparities of Discipline in DOE**
- **Pipeline and Policies Overview**
- **Black Girls and Discipline**
- **Gap in Research**
- **Recommendations**
- **Call to Action**

# Key Terms

## Discipline

- How to best address inappropriate conduct
- The following facts must be considered before determining the appropriate disciplinary measures:
  - the student's age and maturity;
  - the student's disciplinary record (including the nature and instances of prior misconduct and the disciplinary and guidance intervention measures applied for each instance);
  - the nature, severity, and scope of the behavior; the circumstances/context of conduct that occurred;
  - the frequency and duration of the behavior;
  - the number of persons involved in the behavior;
  - the student's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) or BIP (Behavioral Intervention Plan) (Farina et al., 2015).

## School to Prison Pipeline (SPP)

- A system that is designed to over criminalize Black and Brown students through multiple agents that hold students accountable in schools by way of discipline.
- Pigott et al. (2017) define the SPP as the growing epidemic of tracking students through the educational system to the juvenile and adult criminal justice system.

## School Resource Officers (SROs)

- SROs were created in response to the 1990s rise of school crime and shootings.
- Sworn-in law enforcement officers that are designed to be in schools.
- They are usually stationed in schools that are considered a high crime or higher risk of crime. The term higher risk is synonymous with Black and Brown communities.

## No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA)

- Yields higher rate of suspension and expulsion to push out students who have poor grades and test scores.
- It has been linked to school funding by way of test scores.
- Some argue that through this act that the schools were being given incentives to dismiss students that were deemed problematic instead of helping them (Pigott et al., 2017).
- The NCLBA is intertwined with zero-tolerance policies. When this intertwining of policies happens, it increases the vagueness of policies as well as bolsters the lack of discretionary power schools have to apply specific policies (Pigott et al., 2017).

## Zero Tolerance Policies

- Defined by Pigott et al. (2017), is the strict disciplinary policy that mandates automatic harsh outcomes.

## Why Did I Chose This Topic?

- **Personal**

- Identity
- Experiences (First and Second Hand)
- Prior Educational Research and Interest
- My End Goal and Career Objectives

- **State of the World**

- The murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd influenced accountability to prior past brutalization involving officers of the law.

As social workers, we are bound to the NASW code of ethics that include the values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These values are the principles that inform our work with clients. Equally as important in the field of social work is to understand how our positions are highly stigmatized --especially in Black and Brown communities where our work would be highly impactful -- and how to disrupt this. Because of this stigma, many Black and Brown people cope by having their mental health go untreated. If we are not actively working to disrupt and lessen this stigma, we are ultimately perpetuating and compounding it from generation to generation. It is therefore important to investigate these disparities because it deeply affects our work with Black and Brown communities.

For social workers to see, impact, and guide children and families, there must be an understanding of conscious and subconscious factors that disproportionately influence success in an academic system and society. It is no secret that Black students are born out of generational trauma. As Black students are introduced into the educational system their generational trauma is compounded. With awareness and knowledge, social workers can heal Black girls through their generational trauma as well as influence more positive outcomes in their lives.

## Why Is This Important to Social Work?

# Research Questions

Some valuable questions can be formulated to better understand the depth and intensity of these police interactions and the aggressive discipline Black girls are encountering in schools.

- Are the school-to-prison pipeline (SPP) and Black girls' interactions with law enforcement diminishing their future success as Black women?
- Are Black girls being valued and respected in an educational setting?
- Are these interactions with law enforcement creating higher rates of incarceration?
- Are Black girls being treated equally/fairly?
- Is Blackness the motivating factor in perceiving Black students as more threatening?

**I hypothesize that Black and Brown students interactions with the varying vehicles of discipline in our schooling systems will impact negatively Black girls bolstering the SPP and perpetuating intergenerational trauma.**

**Hypothesis**

# History of Racial Disparities in Discipline

## Minneapolis (MNPLS) and Oklahoma City (OKC) Audits

- Before 2015, there was no official guideline or document that provided clarification and an understanding of the roles of the DOE in disciplinary actions
- Black students comprised 26% of the population; however, they represented 42% of in-school suspensions (Rappaport, 2016). These percentages show how Black students are being overrepresented in disciplinary actions. These findings were supported by other DOE investigations into disciplinary practices in MNPLS.
- The OKC and MNPLS audits came before a memorandum that was created to break down the process of what constitutes discipline, the levels of disciplinary recourse, and the preventative and after-effects of disciplining students with neutral methods (Neu, 2016; Rappaport, 2016).
- The OKC audit, conducted by the DOE and OCR, revealed that in the year of 2011-2012 discipline had taken the form of numerous in and out of school suspensions that were referred to law enforcement and turned into arrests of significantly high proportions of Black students (Neu, 2016). They found that the disciplinary actions were not consistent per offense and by race.

# Discipline and the DOE: The Full Picture

- Discipline encompasses knowing the response to unfavorable behavior, record-keeping, and due process of the rights of students and school officials (Farina et al., 2015).
- These components have been under investigation in OKC and MNPLS public school districts.
- There have been inconsistencies and incomplete record-keeping, reports of a lack of training, and understanding into the role of what discipline should look like on both macro and micro levels.

## **Earliest known Administration to clarify what discipline should look like:**

- Obama administration
  - Created and implemented several initiatives to encourage schools to take an alternative strategic approach instead of suspending students
- **What came from this?**
- In 2011, the DOE and DOJ launched the Supportive School Discipline Initiative to coordinate efforts on a federal level (Department of Education, 2014 & 2016).
- In January 2014, the DOE released a resource package that addressed state and local support towards improving school climate and discipline (Department of Education, 2014; Farina et al., 2015).
  - A section that warned against intentional discrimination.
  - An acknowledgment from the DOE about how schools unlawfully discriminate even if there is a policy that is neutral and administered fairly (Steinberg & Laco, 2017).

# Discipline and the DOE: The Full Picture

- DOE understanding discipline as a "teachable moment" is fundamental to a positive approach to discipline (Farina et al., 2015).
- **Approach:**
  - Progressive Discipline Concept
    - Uses incremental interventions to address inappropriate behavior to teach pro-social behavior.
    - Progressive discipline does not seek punishment, but varying levels of accountability and behavioral change.
- **Goal:**
  - Prevention of a recurrence of negative behavior by helping students learn from their mistakes.
- **Implementation:**
  - Helping students who have engaged in unacceptable behavior to achieve five aspects of understanding and helps towards future deterrence.
  - **Five Aspects:**
    - To help the student to understand why the behavior is unacceptable and the harm it has caused
    - To understand what they could have done differently in the same situation
    - To take responsibility for their actions
    - To be allowed to learn pro-social strategies and skills to use in the future
    - To understand the progression of more stringent consequences if the behavior reoccurs (Farina et al., 2015).



# Discipline and the DOE: The Full Picture

## **Accountability and Guidance:**

- School officials must consult the Discipline Code Document when determining which disciplinary measure to impose.
- **How to best address inappropriate conduct:**
  - Necessary to evaluate the entirety of the circumstances surrounding the conduct.
  - **The following facts must be considered before determining the appropriate disciplinary measures:**
    - the student's age and maturity;
    - the student's disciplinary record (including the nature and instances of prior misconduct and the disciplinary and guidance intervention measures applied for each instance);
    - the nature, severity, and scope of the behavior;
    - the circumstances/context of conduct that occurred
    - the frequency and duration of the behavior;
    - the number of persons involved in the behavior
    - the student's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) or BIP (Behavioral Intervention Plan) (Farina et al., 2015).

# Pipeline and Policies: What are the Effects?

- **SPP**

- Creation of SROs transformed schools into prison-like facilities in the name of safety.
- When Black and Brown students are being harshly disciplined by SROs this means that arrests, suspensions and expulsions will go up disproportionately for behaviors that are not considered dangerous.
  - This leads to Black and Brown students being disproportionately introduced to the criminal justice system at earlier ages.
  - The combination of harmful and traumatic interactions with agents and the introduction to the criminal justice system criminalizes Black and Brown on lesser offenses and can increase and directly influence recidivism rates.

- **Zero Tolerance Policies**

- Bolster the power of the perception of threats of students and faculty.
- Can be linked to the policies that evolved from state and federal drug enforcement in the 1980s.
- There is no concrete or objective standard as to how zero-tolerance policies are being carried out in the education system.
- The perception of a threat can be purely subjective and can be weaponized against things you may not have an understanding or experience with.

# Pipeline and Policies: What are the Effects?

- **NCLBA and Zero Tolerance Policies**

- Pigott et al. (2017) present the correlation between a lack of education and incarceration and how these feed into the criminal justice system.
- Pigott et al. (2017) report that through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) there is a higher rate of suspension and expulsion to push out students who have poor grades and test scores.
  - Linked to school funding by way of test scores.
  - Some argue that through this act that the schools were being given incentives to dismiss students that were deemed problematic instead of helping them (Pigott et al., 2017).
- The NCLBA is intertwined with zero-tolerance policies.
  - When this intertwining of policies happens, it increases the vagueness of policies as well as bolsters the lack of discretionary power schools have to apply specific policies (Pigott et al., 2017).
  - Coupling the incentivized dismissal of students deemed problematic with the vagueness of zero-tolerance policies automatically targets Black girls.

Where Can We Be Black, If We Cant Be Black In Africa?

Trigger Warning:  
Discussion of Sexual Assault and Fighting

# Black Girls and Discipline

- Black girls are not evaluated equally by teachers.
- Part of teachers' evaluations includes the behaviors of the children. Black student's behavior overall is evaluated more negatively than their White and Asian counterparts (Zimmerman, 2019). Due to racial biases, teacher's perceptions are heavily influenced by these behaviors that they encounter.
- **Gap in research:**
  - The dynamic of how teachers' perceptions intersect with students' race and gender has been left under-explored.
  - It is important to expand on this by understanding gender and the intersectionality between teachers and their relationships with their students.
- Zimmerman (2019) states that girls tend to have a more positive student-teacher dyad when they show better social and behavioral skills in the classroom.
  - **The Female Advantage**
    - How girls and women outperform boys and men academically.
    - Phenomenon of female advantage is being challenged and nonexistent to most Black girl experiences.
    - How impactful and influential the student-teacher dyad is concerning the rates of success and how it is disproportionately negative in Black student interactions and relationships.
    - There is evidence that teachers rate Black students more poorly than White students. Adults view Black girls as behaviorally unladylike and hypersexual, and are overly criminalized in school due to these perceptions (Zimmerman, 2019). Adults' views and treatment of Black students reflect a controlled issue of Black masculinity and femininity which depicts specifically Black girls and women as masculine or too aggressive in comparison to White girls and women (Zimmerman, 2019).

# Black Girls and Discipline

- Being a Black girl in school you are slowly being taught that everything you are, especially your identity, is not viewed, perceived, or accepted as important or valuable to society. Having these pressures placed subconsciously and unconsciously onto Black girls can provide tumultuous interactions with school administration.
- Black girls are not being understood in many moments like sucking their teeth to vocalizing their beliefs and being criminalized because of it (Tatum, 2003). Black girls are viewed in academic institutes as masculine and too aggressive and therefore this will influence higher instances of discipline and criminality.
- Walker (2020) presents the statistics of a 12% rate of suspension for Black girls which is six times higher than their White girl counterparts.
- The rates in New York City public schools show 90% of expulsion rates where Black students only comprise 28% of enrollment (Walker, 2020).
- In 2020 not one White girl was suspended in this academic year.
- Rates for Black girls' suspensions are increasing faster than any other group including Black boys (Walker, 2020).

# Reasons for Harsher Discipline with Black Girls

- Walker (2020) presents the nature of the harsher discipline that comes from negative perceptions of Black girls, vague and subjective infractions (i.e., disrespect and excessive noise making), hyper-sexual observations and assumptions, and more adult-like.
- Transferring and labeling Black girls with a more adult-like lens is assigning higher levels of culpability and assumed the responsibility that they are not developmentally at.
- This setting of unrealistic accountability is harmful not only for Black girls in the present but also when maneuvering their future through a societally warped view of their identity.

# SPP and Incarceration Rates of Black Girls

- Black children make up 35% of suspension and expulsion rates from grades 7-12 (NAACP, 2016) in comparison to Latino (20%) and Whites (15%)
- Black girls are more than 3X likely than White girls to be incarcerated.
- From 15- 36% of youth that are incarcerated are girls.
  - These girls are usually incarcerated for low-level offenses like truancy and curfew violations.
  - For every 100,000 girls that are incarcerated, 94 will be Black girls.
  - Half of the youth incarcerated are runaway girls.
  - The highest incarceration rates for girls per 100,000, according to The Sentencing Project (2020), are in the states of Nebraska (166), Wyoming (143), Alaska (102), West Virginia (95), and Idaho (81).



# Gaps in the Literature

- **Black Girls: NOT a Focus**

- This research lends itself to closing the gaps about Black girls and their intersectionality between the criminal justice and educational systems.
- There is research that has dissected how Black girls are treated in the criminal justice system and educational system separately.
  - A straight trajectory to the unification of both systems and

how it impacts the Black girl is missing.

- There is a lack of research for rates of Black girls and discipline in all schooling districts.

- It is important to acknowledge that an understanding of the intersectionality of gender and outcomes of girls in the educational and carceral systems is necessary because of its unique outcomes and challenges in Black communities.

- **Black Girls: Invisible**

- Leaving out Black girls in school discipline literature shows a sign of the lack of acknowledgment for a growing epidemic. When there is an absence of acknowledgment, there is an assumption that it is not of importance.
- Black boys have often been the focus of discussing and researching urban school criminality and discipline.
- It is important to acknowledge that while including Black boys in these discussions is crucial, the Black girl experience is even more valuable to include. The inclusion of the Black girl narrative completes the totality of experiences that Black children encounter. While Black boys and girls share a commonality of being Black, they do not share the same experiences navigating the educational and criminal justice systems. It has been reported that Black girls receive harsher treatments in both systems and the amount of research that explores this intersectionality is limited. The consistent lack of acknowledgment has aided in making Black girls ultimately invisible.

# Recommendations: Educators and Educational System

- **Micro Level**

- **CRT**

- Use CRT through a personal lens of being an educator, how to teach it to your students, and how to manage the classroom better when there is conflict.

- **Deconstruction of Educator Perspectives**

- This aides in validating negative stereotypes of Black girls, perpetuating the SPP, and bolstering potential negative outcomes with Black girls.
- I want more Black educators in schooling districts can start to dismantle these perceptions. When you have more Black educators having the power to deescalate potentially violent situations/interactions with law enforcement, the percentage of violent interactions with SROs lessens and the SPP is not growing at alarming rates.
- With these changes, Black girls would finally get a positive outlook on not only life but the educational system.

- **Macro Level**

- **Collaboration**

- **SROs**

- to lessen aggressive negative outcomes for Black girls in schools. On a macro level, SROs and educators should rework specific discipline actions per school to include language around how to be fair and inclusive of Black girls.

## Micro and Macro

- **Representation**

- Key in creating a safe space for Black girls.
- Identify with the people around you that you are being taught that you matter and are of value.
  - For example: having educators, social workers, or any other specific industry worker be Black gives Black children the tangible proof that you can become that position too.
- Higher and varied positions within the education system
- Innate understanding of the Black girl/boy journey when you have Black women/men in varying academic positions.

# Recommendations: Policies

## Macro Level

- **Fourth Amendment Loophole**

- This loophole grants power to be given to SRO's. If there was a redefinition of the powers -- to be more appropriate while changing the kind and levels of power that SROs have-- we could potentially see a powerful positional shift in the right direction.
- SROs should be looked at as a liaison between the academic system (educators and children/family) and law enforcement, not the enforcers

- **Definition change of Discipline**

- This definition should be inclusive of a multi-layered understanding of Black girls and boys. There should be a level of cultural and racial awareness while rewriting how discipline should be carried out in schools when engaging Black students.

- **Rewriting of description of SROs**

- Focus: Up keeping discipline and safety within schools.
- SRO's and law enforcement renamed mediators versus enforcers of the law.
- Skillsets and training should include mediation, de-escalation, and cultural and racial awareness.
- There should be, similar to some parts of various police department initiatives of community policing, people with these positions living in or neighboring zip codes. There have been studies showing that if you understand a particular neighborhood because you are a part of that community, then you know how to navigate and bolster it.

- **Dismantling DOE and DOJ partnership**

- DOJ is known for implementing harsh and unfair punishment in every aspect of its range of power against Black and Brown communities. There is no reason to continue their partnership when trying to dismantle a White supremacist disciplinary agenda. Taking away the influence of heavily aggressive and racist ideologies of the DOJ can have a positive impact on how discipline is carried out in schools.

# Call to Action

- **Social workers to impact effective change in Black girls.**
  - Social workers must not only address both systems and their inherent negative impact but also create unique policy changes and interventions that reflect this compounded epidemic.
  - It is imperative to acknowledge the projection of the negative effects and outcomes of all systems that overly criminalizes Black girls and disrupt each link that compounds this problem.
  - To make the policy changes and interventions a reality, the societal mindset must change. This change, at minimum, should take place through the acknowledgment of how the educational system influences the over-criminalization of Black girls in a system that was designed to bolster SPP rates. Once a holistic approach is taken, then each link can influence positive outcomes for Black girls.
- **It is our job to be able to disrupt and dismantle even at a client level.**
  - Once there is awareness of these generational, societal, and systemic vehicles of oppression, there must be an impact through positive change in communities that have been destroyed for generations and generations.
  - To continue to educate oneself and start to lessen the ignorance on this topic.
  - Now is the time to act and widen our lens within the Black and Brown community to lessen the future implications of this epidemic and to be able to provide stronger more successful outcomes in Black girls' lives.