



Criminalized and Unprotected: School Police Violence against Girls of Color

In March of 2019, a 15-year-old Black girl was punched in the face by a police officer patrolling her school.¹ Across the country, girls of color are criminalized and assaulted by law enforcement officers based in their schools. In just the past decade, there were countless instances reported by the media of police officers using physical force or weapons against female students of color.² Just as the story above describes, law enforcement abuse their authority and powers like use of physical force to make schools actively dangerous spaces for girls of color.

The following piece will outline the racial and gender-based biases which may influence a police officer's conduct in schools, the statistical result of these prejudices, and the stories of students who have experienced this discrimination first hand.

Girls of Color are Targeted by Police at Higher Rates

According to the National Black Women's Justice Initiative, in the 2015–2016 academic year, Black girls were four times more likely to be arrested, three times more likely to be referred to law enforcement, and twice as likely to be physically restrained in schools in comparison to white female students.³

The local level mirrors the national context. In 2018, police in New York City schools physically restrained 456 female students, 65% of whom were Black and 31% of whom were hispanic. Likewise, of the 218 female students arrested, 67% were Black and 28% were Latinx.⁴ Given that Black and white students account for 26% and 15% of New York City's student body respectively, Black girls were almost 19 times more likely to physically restrained and 14 times more likely to be arrested by police than white female students. Latinx girls were almost 6 times more likely to physically restrained and almost 4 times more likely to be arrested by police than their white female peers.⁵ All of these alarming statistics portray the reality of school police violence* many girls of color experience.

¹ Tony Atkins, "MPD, SCS investigating after school officer accused of assaulting 15-year-old girl," *FOX 13*, March 26 2019, available at: <https://www.fox13memphis.com/top-stories/mpd-scs-investigating-after-school-officer-accused-of-assaulting-15-year-old-girl/934475389>.

² Girls for Gender Equity, "When Girls of Color are Assaulted by School Resource Officers," June 2019, available at: <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/eb4c15f3cada9cc6a6d4d64c74e6e1a0/sro-goc/index.html>

³ Misha N. Inniss-Thompson, "Summary of Discipline Data for Girls in U.S. Public Schools: An Analysis from the 2015 - 2016 U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data Collection," *The National Black Women's Justice Institute*, October 2018, available at: https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/0c71ee_9506b355e3734ba791248c0f681f6d03.pdf.

⁴ New York City Police Department, Student Safety Act Data, 2018 Quarters 1-4, excluding students over twenty years of age, available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/reports-analysis/school-safety.page>.

⁵ New York City Department of Education, Data at a Glance, available at: <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/doe-data-at-a-glance>.

What is School Police Violence?

Thus far we have raised examples of two forms of school police violence. One which more naturally appears to be “wrong:” assault or the abuse of power by police officer. The other, arrest or restraint by police, is more subtle, since most people determine these actions to fall within the purview of an officer’s authority. However, all of these actions confront students with law enforcement, which can have consequences for the rest of their lives.⁶ When a student is reprimanded through law enforcement as opposed to educational practitioners it disrupts what is referred to as a “positive school climate.”⁷ Given students are at a key developmental stage, it is important that while they grow they are minimally exposed to traumatic experiences.⁸ The constant surveillance and potential violence students may perceive in schools (due to the frequency of police engagement or assaults) is antithetical to the positive climate and often leads students, and particularly students of color, to dissociate from schools.⁹ For these reasons Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) categorizes police assaults, use of physical restraints, and arrests as school violence dangerous to the prosperity of girls of color.

School Police Officers Criminalize Youth of Color

The institution of school police has been a common response to the gun violence which has recently garnered substantial media attention. Shootings such as those at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Stoneman Douglas High School have generated reactions from politicians to increase police presence in schools to make them safer. What we have seen, though, is that police presence results in the criminalization of Black and brown students, particularly girls of color and transgender and gender nonconforming youth of color.

The danger posed by police presents itself both in physical assaults but also in police surveillance and policing interventions for Black and brown students. This can be particularly harmful if the school staff trained to handle disciplinary matters and restorative practices are not in the schools. “Students of color are more likely to attend schools that employ school police officers, but no school counselors. [And,] Black students are three times more likely to attend a school with more security staff than mental health personnel.”¹⁰

Still, police pose a real physical threat to students of color. In fact, “police are more likely to use force in interactions with young people than with adults.”¹¹ And often violence occurs in response to low level discipline matters like being out of class, using one’s phone, or fighting with a classmate.¹²

⁶ The Dignity in Schools Campaign, “Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings,” 2018, page 14, available at: <https://dignityinschools.org/resources/police-in-schools-are-not-the-answer-to-school-shootings/>.

⁷ Californians for Justice, “School Climate,” 2018, available at: <https://caljustice.org/issues/school-climate/>.

⁸ YWCA, “Girls of Color and Trauma,” April 2018, available at:

<https://www.ywca.org/advocacy/policy-priorities/support-girls-of-color-who-are-trauma-survivors/>.

⁹ Advancement Project, “We Came to Learn: A Call to Action for Police-Free Schools,” 2018, page 31 & 38, available at: <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>.

¹⁰ Advancement Project, “We Came to Learn,” page 38.

¹¹ American Civil Liberties Union, “Bullies in Blue: Origins and Consequences of School Policing,” April 2017, page 22, available at: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/bullies-blue>.

¹² Advancement Project, “We Came to Learn,” page 38.

School Police Officers Attack Girls of Color

Across the country girls of color experience assault at the hands of police officers in their schools. Since 2007, there have been at least twenty three accounts of female students of color being beaten, body-slammed, tasered, or pepper sprayed by one or more police officers stationed in their school. GGE, this year, put together [a map](#) of these incidents to not let this type of abuse of power go unnoticed. Below are a couple of those stories.

In Avon Park, Florida in March 2007, Desre'e Watson, at 6 years old, was handcuffed by her biceps for being defiant and throwing a tantrum in her kindergarten class. She was driven in a patrol car to the county jail where she was fingerprinted and had her mugshot taken. She was charged with battery of a school official and two misdemeanor charges. After a brief stay in jail, she was released into the custody of her mother.¹³

In December 2013, an off-duty Chicago police officer, Xavier Chism, who worked as a security guard at Community Youth Development Institute harassed 17-year-old Aaliyah Russell-Morgan based on her gender expression and then wrestled her to the ground for being slow to get to class. A lawsuit filed against the school and city states the officer said "If you're going to act like a boy, I'm going to treat you like a boy" before he dragged her outside and wrestled her to the ground.¹⁴

In September 2014 in Tampa Bay, Florida, 17-year-old Brittany Overstreet was slammed twice to the ground by a school resource officer when she was suspected of bringing mace to school. She suffered a concussion and a fractured jaw, was handcuffed, was suspended for 10 days, and faced criminal charges. Additionally, no mace was ever found in her bag.¹⁵

In October 2014 in Baltimore, Maryland, three middle school students were assaulted by a school resource officer. One of the girls, Starr, was grabbed and pushed against the wall by the officer in between classes. When her cousin and sister tried to help Starr, the officer pepper sprayed the sisters and hit Diamond, Starr's cousin, in the head with her baton twice. All three students sought medical assistance, were charged with assaulting an officer, and eventually sent to alternative schools.¹⁶

In September 2016 in Leesburg, Florida, two girls were tasered, arrested, and charged with breach of peace and resisting without violence after getting into a fight on the school's track. One of the students needed to seek medical attention after the school resource officer

¹³ Bob Herbert, "6-Year-Olds Under Arrest," *The New York Times*, April 9 2007, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/09/opinion/09herbert.html>.

¹⁴ Megan Crepeau, "Lawsuit: Off-duty Chicago cop beats gay teen, brother at school," *The Chicago Tribune*, January 30 2015, available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/redeye/redeye-gay-student-sues-offduty-cop-alleged-beating-20150130-story.html>.

¹⁵ Ruth Jeannoel, "The school-to-prison pipeline affects girls of color, but reform efforts pass them by," *The Guardian*, June 11 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/11/school-prison-pipeline-girls-of-color-reform>.

¹⁶ Jayne Miller, "Girls injured, suspended after fight with school officer," *WBALTV 11 News*, January 29 2015, available at: <https://www.wbaltv.com/article/girls-injured-suspended-after-fight-with-school-officer/7091587>.

discovered a stun gun probe had been caught in her bra under her arm. Both students were released to their respective parents and suspended from school.¹⁷

As disturbing as these stories are, they all highlight important aspects of the abuse girls of color face at the hands of law enforcement. Law enforcement are often much larger and almost always significantly stronger than the girls they reprimand. Because of this, use of physical force is almost always unnecessary and can do real physical harm to the students. When not relying on physical force, police still abuse the weapons which are at their disposal: tasers, pepper spray, and batons. Even when using handcuffs and other physical restraints within their legal purview, police find it necessary to use such forces on girls as young as 6 years old. This simply begs the question: What could girls of color be doing to incite such severe force?

Social Stereotypes Make Girls of Color More Vulnerable

Too often girls of color are disciplined “for subjective reasons, such as disobedience/defiance, detrimental behavior, and third-degree assault, all of which depend on the subjective judgement of school personnel.”¹⁸ The danger of subjective reasoning is that it may be biased by the racial and gender-based stereotypes which permeate American culture. In particular, school officers and “teachers may subconsciously use stereotypical images of Black females ... to interpret Black girls’ behaviors and respond more harshly to Black girls who display behaviors that do not align with traditional standards of femininity” such as docility, diffidence, and selflessness.¹⁹ These skewed perceptions “result in patterns of discipline intended to re-form the femininity of African-American girls” to be more desirable.²⁰ When Black women and girls were surveyed, the participants’ experiences supported this hypothesis, reporting “that when Black girls express strong or contrary views, adults view them as challenging authority or ... simply assume a girl’s character is just plain ‘bad.’”²¹ This seems to be corroborated by one study that found “teachers trained their focus on condemning such comportment [that not docile or compliant] at the expense of guiding [Black girls’] academic progress – effectively disciplining Black girls for perceived loud and un-ladylike behavior that challenged their authority.”²² In summation, Black girls seem to be disproportionately punished and policed not based solely on their actions but on a perceived attitude that needs reforming in the eyes of teachers and school police officers.

Stereotypes are not the only societal assumption affecting Black girls’ disciplining. What scholars term “adultification” may also influence how educational practitioners and police officers determine the severity of a Black female student’s punishment. Adultification is a bias

¹⁷ Kimberly Rehmann, “Girls brawl at Leesburg High School: Viral video shows fight on school’s track,” *WKMG ClickOrlando*, September 11 2016, available at: <https://www.clickorlando.com/news/brawl-breaks-out-at-leesburg-high>.

¹⁸ Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, & Thalia González, “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood,” *Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality*, 2017, page 9.

¹⁹ Jamilia J. Blake, Bettie Ray Butler, Chance W. Lewis, & Alicia Darensbourg, “Unmasking the Inequitable Discipline Experiences of Urban Black Girls: Implications for Urban Educational Stakeholders,” *The Urban Review*, March 2011, page 93.

²⁰ Epstein et. al., “Girlhood Interrupted,” 5.

²¹ Jamilia J. Blake & Rebecca Epstein, “Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experiences of Adultification Bias,” *Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality*, 2019, page 4.

²² Epstein et. al., “Girlhood Interrupted,” 6.

“in which adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, [... not] based on observation of an individual girl’s behavior,” but a presumption.²³ In school, examples of adultification largely fall into two categories: reprimand based on inappropriate behavior and directly mistaking a student’s age.

Inappropriate behavior reprimanding refers to the practice of disciplining Black girls more harshly than their white peers, even for the same act, because the Black student should “know better.” Research shows that students of color are no more likely to misbehave than their white peers.²⁴ But, “educators and school-based police officers ... [may] be more likely to view Black girls as older and less innocent ... [resulting] in disciplinary decision-makers’ viewing Black girls’ behavior as ‘more [intentionally] harmful than [similar behavior exhibited by] other girls.’”²⁵ Put another way, “adultification contributes to a false narrative that Black youths’ transgressions are intentional and malicious, instead of the result of immature decision-making – a key characteristic of childhood.”²⁶ This bars Black girls from the opportunity “to make mistakes and to learn, grow, and benefit from correction for youthful missteps to the same degree as white children.”²⁷

Police also present their adultification bias in more overt ways, such as literally mistaking the age of a Black girl they intend to criminalize. Take this story for example:

A 15-year-old Black girl in New York was arrested by police for using a student metrocard that is only valid for youth younger than 19. The officers did not believe the girl’s claim that she was 15 years old, nor the affirmations of her age that they obtained from each of her parents when reached by phone. Police held the girl in handcuffs until the girl’s mother brought her birth certificate to the police station.²⁸

Continuing to focus on New York City, we can see how adultification bias presents itself in school system wide disciplinary statistics. In 2018, the youngest person to be physically restrained was a 6-year-old Black girl. The youngest female students arrested were six 12-year-old Black and hispanic students, five of whom were restrained in the process. The youngest white girl physically restrained was 10 years old. And the youngest white girl restrained and arrested was 16 years old.²⁹ These interactions may have occurred due to mistaken age, an instance on “inappropriate behavior,” or neither of the two. Nevertheless it is clear that school police officers feel the need to protect against instead of on behalf of girls of color beginning at young ages.

In Conclusion

We can no longer afford to leave girls of color at the margins of our concerns with respect to school policing. They are restrained, arrested, and attacked in the very spaces they are

²³ Blake et al., “Listening to Black Women and Girls,” 1.

²⁴ Dignity in Schools Campaign, “Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings,” page 3.

²⁵ Epstein et. al., “Girlhood Interrupted,” 11.

²⁶ Epstein et. al., “Girlhood Interrupted,” 16.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Epstein et. al., “Girlhood Interrupted,” 6.

²⁹ New York City Police Department, Student Safety Act Data, 2018 Quarters 1-4, excluding students over twenty years of age.

meant to grow and learn. All students have the right to safety and security in their schools. For girls of color, it is clear that does not include school law enforcement.