

INTRODUCTION

Call my mama!” This was the cry of fourteen-year-old Dejerria Becton, who in the summer of 2015 was thrown to the ground as well as physically and verbally assaulted by Corporal Eric Casebolt after she refused to leave her friends at the mercy of this law enforcement officer in McKinney, Texas. A video, which later went viral, showed Casebolt pushing Dejerria’s face into the ground as she—a slight-framed, barefoot, bikini-clad teenager who presented no physical threat or danger—screamed for someone to call her mother for help. The video showed Casebolt grinding his knee into her bare skin and restraining her by placing the full weight of his body onto hers.

The incident was violent and reeked of sexual assault—overtones that were later deemed inappropriate, “out of control,” and inconsistent with the police department’s policies, training, and articulated practices.¹ Though Casebolt resigned in response to the public outcry and internal scrutiny associated with his actions, the image of her helpless, frightened body under his has become one of the snapshots that call our public consciousness to examine the overzealous policing and criminalization of Black youth. Though media and advocacy efforts have largely focused on the extreme and intolerable abuse cases involving Black boys, such as seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida or twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Ohio, a growing number of cases involving Black girls have surfaced to reveal what many of us have known for centuries: Black

girls are also directly impacted by criminalizing policies and practices that render them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, dehumanization, and, under the worst circumstances, death. For example, eighteen-year-old Sheneque Proctor died in police custody after she was arrested for disorderly conduct in Bessemer, Alabama.² Even in high-profile cases involving boys, we often fail to see the girls who were right there alongside them. After the fatal shooting of Tamir Rice, the officers tackled his fourteen-year-old sister to the ground and handcuffed her. Not only had she just watched her little brother die at the hands of these officers, but she was forced to grieve his death from the backseat of a police car.³

Addressing these problematic narratives has proved difficult in the current social and political climate, one that embraces punitive responses to expressions of dissent and increases the surveillance of the homes where our families live, the communities where our children play, and the schools where our children are educated.

The result has been an increasing number of girls in contact with the criminal and juvenile justice systems. Since 1992, girls' share of delinquency cases resulting in detention (the most common form of confinement for girls) has increased, often for charges such as prostitution, simple assault, or status offenses.* For a host of reasons—paternalistic juvenile courts and a lack of community-based, culturally competent, and gender-responsive services among them—diversion away from these systems has been underutilized with girls. These are mostly girls of color (a disproportionately high percentage of girls are Black and/or Latina), and many of them (by some estimates 40 percent) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ), or gender-nonconforming.⁴

One of the most persistent and salient traits among girls who have been labeled “delinquent” is that they have failed to establish a meaningful and sustainable connection with schools. This miss-

* Status offenses refer to those that are only a violation because the person is underage, such as truancy, curfew violations, or running away from home.

ing link is exacerbated by the increased reliance of public schools on exclusionary discipline, at present one of the most widely used measures to deal with problematic student behaviors. Indeed, nearly 48 percent of Black girls who are expelled nationwide do not have access to educational services.⁵ Black girls are 16 percent of the female student population, but nearly one-third of all girls referred to law enforcement and more than one-third of all female school-based arrests.⁶

The criminalization of Black girls is much more than a street phenomenon. It has extended into our schools, disrupting one of the most important protective factors in a girl's life: her education.

In May 2013, Ashlynn Avery, a sixteen-year-old diabetic girl in Alabama, fell asleep while reading *Huckleberry Finn* during her in-school suspension. When she did not respond, the suspension supervisor allegedly threw a book at her and ordered her to leave the classroom. As she was leaving the room, a police officer allegedly slammed her face into a file cabinet and then arrested her.⁷ In April 2013, sixteen-year-old Kiera Wilmot was charged with a felony offense when what she said was a science experiment went wrong, leaving her subjected to a mandatory suspension and arrest following an unauthorized "explosion" on school grounds.⁸ The charges were later dropped after significant public objection and petitioning by advocacy groups; however, after the incident, Wilmot has feared being labeled a "terrorist."⁹ In 2008, Marché Taylor was arrested in Texas after she resisted being barred from prom for wearing a dress that was considered too revealing.¹⁰ And in 2007, Pleajhia Mervin was harmed by a California school security officer after she dropped a piece of cake on the school's cafeteria floor and refused to pick it up.¹¹

Some of the most egregious applications of punitive school discipline in this country have criminalized Black girls as young as six or seven years old, who have been arrested for throwing

tantrums in their school classrooms, yelling and screaming at a teacher, and being disruptive to the learning environment. Six-year-old Salecia Johnson was arrested in Georgia in 2012 for having a tantrum in her classroom.¹² In 2011, seven-year-old Michelle Mitchell was arrested with her eight-year-old brother after they got into a fight on an Ohio school bus.¹³ And six-year-old Desre'e Watson was handcuffed and arrested at a Florida school in in 2007 for throwing a tantrum in her kindergarten class.¹⁴

These cases were so extreme that they managed to capture considerable public attention—mostly through social media. However, they were never pieced together to present a comprehensive, national portrait of how school responses to the disruptive behaviors of Black girls push them out and often render them vulnerable to further victimization and delinquency. It turns out that the incidents involving Ashlynn, Kiera, Marché, Pleajhia, Salecia, Michelle, and Desre'e were not isolated ones. Black girls from coast to coast tell stories of being criminalized and pushed out of schools.

For many Black girls, interactions between the justice system and schools often do not begin, or end, in school. The surveillance to which Black girls are subjected, and the punitive responses to either their (sometimes poor, sometimes typical) decision making or their reactions to perceived injustice have made contact with law enforcement a frequent occurrence. The implementation of zero-tolerance policies, as I will discuss throughout this book, has become the primary driver of an unscrupulous school-based reliance on law enforcement and school security guards. People who often know little to nothing about child or adolescent development, and who often lack the appropriate awareness and training for the school environments they patrol, are responding to behaviors that were previously managed by skilled teachers, counselors, principals, and other professionals. While there are plenty of numbers and statistics that paint a troubling picture, the harm done by this shift can hardly be quantified. Black girls are being

criminalized in and by the very places that should help them thrive.

Historical Perspectives on the Importance of Educating Black Girls

Long before the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black women were clear about the liberative power of education. Under slavery, the education of people of African descent was illegal and considered a punishable offense under state slave codes.* In Georgia, enslaved Africans or other free people of color were fined or whipped, at the discretion of the court, if discovered reading or writing “in either written or printed characters.”¹⁵ In this society, to read challenged the oppressive, controlling logic of slavery and the presupposed inferiority of Black people. For many enslaved Black women, learning to read represented a reclamation of human dignity and provided an opportunity to ground their challenges to the institution in scholarship, literature, and biblical scripture. Many a Black woman’s commitment to education was so strong that she risked incarceration or other penalties just to attain it.

Why take the risk? Because Black women understood the reward. Having an education would make it much harder for Black people to be relegated to servitude and poverty. Those Black women who became educators and generally learned people were able to renegotiate power relationships that had previously held them in bondage, and recast themselves as directors of their own destinies. Education provided an alternative—and it was tangible. It was tangible in 1793, when Catherine Ferguson, a formerly enslaved young woman, committed her life to corralling “poor and neglected” Black and White children for religious instruction on Sunday.¹⁶

* States with slave codes that delineated the status of enslaved persons and the rights of their “owners” included Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Maryland, Louisiana, Texas, and parts of Missouri, among others.

Though she could not read or write herself, as the founder of New York's first Sunday school, Ferguson was hungry to pass on her faith practice and the important educational lessons that she knew would provide tools for others to secure a better future.¹⁷ It was tangible in 1853 when Sarah Mapps Douglass, an abolitionist and passionate educator, led the girls' preparatory department for the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth.¹⁸ It was tangible in 1904 when Mary McLeod Bethune opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School; with just five students, she built the foundation for what would eventually become a co-ed institution of higher learning, Bethune-Cookman College.¹⁹

In each of these cases, Black women understood that education was a core civil and human right. It was the foundation upon which a life of opportunity stood. It was a critical tool for advancement in a society that regularly practiced discrimination against women and against people of color. But the road was neither easy nor straight. Black women's efforts to establish educational pathways encountered significant backlash. In the South, where efforts to restrict opportunity followed the emancipation of enslaved Black people, education was embraced as a tool for the upward mobility of freemen and freewomen—which meant that to be educated remained a threat to the power structure. Fear of retaliation was warranted and quite palpable.

In October 1871, thirty-five-year-old Carolyn Smith, in testimony before Congress, described the terror that Black communities in Atlanta, Georgia, felt from the Ku Klux Klan in response to their quest for education. In her testimony, she was asked about a beating that she and her husband endured one night from a group of men who identified as Ku Klux Klan members: "They said we should not have any schools . . . They went to a colored man there, whose son had been teaching school, and they took every book they had and threw them into the fire; and

they said they would dare any other nigger to have a book in his house.”²⁰

Historically, to be a scholar was a dangerous proposition for Black Americans and countless Black women and men have died to be able to read and write. The lingering barriers to a quality education and the transgenerational trauma associated with internalized ideas about performance in school have yet to be exhaustively measured. However, the systematic denial of equal access to education for African American children has been documented and successfully challenged in the judicial system,²¹ in the social sciences,²² and in the court of public opinion.²³

While White students and students of color have continued to experience separate and unequal learning environments over the past six decades, most legal and educational reform advocates recognize *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) as the landmark case that ended legal segregation in our society.* *Brown* was both a precursor to civil rights laws designed to guarantee equal protection and eliminate de jure segregation as well as an important extension of a growing public will to reimagine the promise of American democracy.† However, while de jure segregation may have ended in many ways with the *Brown* decision, affecting public policy well beyond the issue of education, it did not address the ways in which enduring xenophobia, tribalism, and the intersections between race and poverty would sustain de facto segregation—expanded

* The Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was actually a combination of five cases from five different jurisdictions: Delaware (*Gebhart v. Belton*, 1952), Kansas (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1951), South Carolina (*Briggs v. Elliott*, 1952), Virginia (*Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, 1952), and the District of Columbia (*Bolling v. Sharpe*, 1952).

† For the purposes of this book, de jure segregation is defined as the practice of forcibly separating people along racial or ethnic lines, using laws, policy, or practice.

residential racial isolation that by extension kept schools highly segregated. The decision also did not anticipate future proxies for race (including class and criminal conviction history) that would later facilitate a resegregation of several public learning spaces that had in fact managed notable progress on integration.

Since the elimination of de jure segregation, Black girls have been subjected to harmful stereotypes about Black femininity that have at least shaped and at worst defined their experiences in classrooms and schools around the country. The ways in which Black girls' educational experiences would be constructed according to a hierarchy that favors White middle-class norms has been floating under the national radar for six decades. As Patricia Hill-Collins wrote, "All women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual, White femininity as normative. In this context, Black femininity as a subordinated gender identity becomes constructed not just in relation to White women, but also in relation to multiple others, namely, all men, sexual outlaws (prostitutes and lesbians), unmarried women, and girls."²⁴

While not referring specifically to educational environments, these norms permeate and shape how Black women and girls are understood and treated in innumerable aspects of public and private life. The purpose of this book is to interrogate the racial and gender inequality that still prevails in education more than sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. In setting forth some truths that have heretofore been ignored or obscured, my aim is to chart a new path and advocate for efforts that move beyond the "deliberate speed" rhetoric that has for too long underserved low-income girls of color, Black girls in particular.

The central argument of this book is that too many Black girls are being criminalized (and physically and mentally harmed) by beliefs, policies, and actions that degrade and marginalize both their learning and their humanity, leading to conditions that push them out of schools and render them vulnerable to even more

harm. We can counter the criminalization of Black girls in schools by first understanding what their criminalization looks like, and then by building a common language and framework for making sure that struggling Black girls are not left behind. We can all get behind a fair and effective education strategy that provides a quality education for every young person.

Expanding the School-to-Prison Pipeline Discussion

In a 2012 report, *Race, Gender, and the “School to Prison Pipeline”: Expanding Our Discussion to Include Black Girls*,²⁵ I argued that the “pipeline” framework has been largely developed from the conditions and experiences of males. It limits our ability to see the ways in which Black girls are affected by surveillance (zero-tolerance policies, law enforcement in schools, metal detectors, etc.) and the ways in which advocates, scholars, and other stakeholders may have wrongfully masculinized Black girls’ experiences. It encourages a kind of myopia that leaves everyone involved without a proper understanding or articulation of the school relationships and other factors that put Black girls in “the system” and on paths toward incarceration.

Literature exploring the school-to-prison pipeline is dominated by an investigation of discipline, and in particular, the use of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions and expulsions) among Black males, and largely obfuscates the ways in which Black females and males experience this phenomenon together *and* differently.

While leading a series of focus groups in New York to inform a report by the African American Policy Forum, *Black Girls Matter*, I encountered Tamara, who described her first experience with suspension as follows:*

* Tamara is a pseudonym. Descriptive details and the names of group members and research participants have been changed to protect the privacy and ensure the safety of all students whose stories appear in this book.

I was in the 5th grade, and this boy, he kept spitting them spitballs through a straw at me while we was [*sic*] taking a test. I told the teacher, and he told him to stop; but of course, he didn't. He kept doing it. So, I got up and I yelled at him, and he punched me in my face, like in my eye . . . my eye was swollen and everything . . . I don't even remember if I fought him, 'cause that's just how it ended, I think. But I remember that we both got suspended, and I was like, why did I get suspended? I was, like, a victim . . . all the girls rushed to my side, they took me down to the nurse and then, it was just a mess.²⁶

Tamara described this incident as the first of many subsequent suspensions. It sent her a powerful signal about whether or not she would be protected in school—and how she needed to behave moving forward. As she understood it, she was likely going to face suspension under most circumstances involving conflict, no matter the particular circumstances. The common approach in schools and outside of them for discussing this scenario would prioritize responding to *his* suspension, rather than equally responding to both. While patterns of exclusionary discipline have been found to produce similar outcomes between Black girls and Black boys, narrative-based research—the sort drawn on throughout this book—uncovers a more nuanced picture.²⁷

Through stories we find that Black girls are greatly affected by the stigma of having to participate in identity politics that marginalize them or place them into polarizing categories: they are either “good” girls or “ghetto” girls who behave in ways that exacerbate stereotypes about Black femininity, particularly those relating to socioeconomic status, crime, and punishment.²⁸ When Black girls do engage in acts that are deemed “ghetto”—often a euphemism for actions that deviate from social norms tied to a narrow, White middle-class definition of femininity—they are frequently labeled as nonconforming and thereby subjected to criminalizing responses.²⁹

It has also been speculated that Black girls' nonconformity to traditional gender expectations may prompt educators to respond more harshly to the negative behaviors of Black girls.³⁰ For example, a 2007 study found that teachers often perceived Black girls as being "loud, defiant, and precocious" and that Black girls were more likely than their White or Latina peers to be reprimanded for being "unladylike."³¹ Other research has found that the issuance of summonses and/or arrests appear to be justified by students' display of "irate," "insubordinate," "disrespectful," "uncooperative," or "uncontrollable" behavior.³² These labels underscore the use of discipline, punishment, and the juvenile justice system to regulate identity and social status. They also reflect a consciousness that refuses to honor the critical thinking and leadership skills of Black girls, casting them as social deviants rather than critical respondents to oppression—perceived and concrete.

Notwithstanding these trends, the narrative arc of the school-to-prison pipeline has largely failed to interrogate how punitive discipline policies and other school-related decision-making affect the well-being of girls. Ignoring their unique pathways to confinement and other contact with the criminal legal system that result from school dropout and delinquency has lasting and transgenerational impacts, particularly for those who have experienced victimization.³³ Being abused and/or neglected as a child increases the risk of arrest among children by 59 percent and among adults by 28 percent.³⁴ And female foster youth are at a higher risk of arrest (34 percent) by the age of nineteen than females and males in the general population (3 percent and 20 percent, respectively)—a reality that facilitates a "way of life" that is more likely to include surveillance, substance abuse, and participation in underground economies.³⁵ Failing to interrupt pathways to delinquency for girls has lasting effects not just on their own adult lives but also on the lives of future generations of girls and boys, who are more susceptible to being involved with the judicial system as a result of their *mother's* incarceration.³⁶ There have been some

notable programs and moderate support for the daughters, partners, and mothers of criminalized men and boys; still, exploring the deficiencies and investing in the education of Black girls and the women they become must be about more than whether their father, brother, son, or partner is struggling or incarcerated. The full inclusion of Black girls in the dominant discourse on school discipline, pushout, and criminalization is important simply because it affects *them*—and their well-being is worthy of investment.

Toward this end, it has to be acknowledged that most Black girls experience forms of confinement and carceral experiences beyond simply going to jail or prison. Broadening the scope to include detention centers, house arrest, electronic monitoring, and other forms of social exclusion allows us to see Black girls in trouble where they might otherwise be hidden. Therefore, in this book and in general, I refer to “school-to-confinement pathways” as opposed to a “school-to-prison pipeline” when describing the educational factors that impact a girl’s risk of confinement.

The criminalization of Black girls in schools is more than just a function of arrests on campus, or even the disparate use of exclusionary discipline—though those outcomes are certainly important to mapping the impact of punitive policies. Paramount to shifting our lens is understanding the convergence of actions with a prevailing consciousness that accepts an inferior quality of Black femininity. This is what underlies the exploitation and criminalization of Black girls. Historic representations of Black femininity, coupled with contemporary memes—about “loud” Black girls who talk back to teachers, “ghetto” Black girls who fight in school hallways, and “ratchet” Black girls who chew dental dams like bubble gum in classrooms—have rendered Black girls subject to a public scrutiny that affects their ability to be properly situated in the racial justice and school-to-confinement narrative. They are rendered invisible or cast as deserving of the mistreatment

because of who they are misperceived to be. What suffers is not only their ability to shape their identities as young scholars but also their ability to develop agency in shaping professional and personal futures where they can live with dignity, respect, and opportunity.

The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. . . . May she see her opportunity and vindicate her high prerogative.

—*Anna Julia Cooper, 1892*³⁷

This book presents narratives that I hope will inspire us all to think about the multiple ways in which racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequity converge to marginalize Black girls in their learning environments—relegating many to an inferior quality of education because they are perceived as defiant, delinquent, aggressive, too sexy, too proud, and too loud to be treated with dignity in their schools.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, while Black girls have been able to achieve a certain degree of academic success, they have also been subjected to powerful narratives about their collective identity that impact what they think about school, what they think about themselves as scholars, and how they perform as students. In Chapter 2, I look at how Black girls are disproportionately represented among those who experience the type of discipline that renders children vulnerable to delinquency and future incarceration. This chapter also brings into focus why their experiences are important to understanding the full impact of zero-tolerance policies, and to developing classroom-, school-, and community-based

interventions for high-risk youth. The intention is to demonstrate through narratives the importance of Black girls' educational conditions and to improving the socioeconomic conditions of Black communities, and ultimately to decreasing the institutional and individual risks that fuel mass incarceration and our collective overreliance on punishment.

Chapter 3 addresses critical questions of sexual and gender identity among Black girls and the ways in which they are affected by policies, practices, and a prevailing consciousness that seek to regulate their bodies in the learning environment. Chapter 4 explores Black girls' educational experiences in correctional facilities, and Chapter 5 examines how Black girls can be supported in repairing their relationships with school and how institutions can better support their educational and career objectives. Finally, Appendix A offers a Q&A highlighting the most common questions that advocates receive from Black girls, their parents, educators, and community service providers about how to combat school pushout and the criminalization of Black girls, and Appendix B lists some innovative approaches that schools and facilities are currently testing out. The epigraphs to Chapters 1–4 are pulled from childhood rhymes and songs that have been recited by African American girls and others for several generations. While their origins and lyrics vary by the region of the country in which they were learned, they remain a fixture in Black communities.

This work is intended to encourage a robust conversation about how to reduce the criminalization of Black girls in our nation's learning environments. The pathways to incarceration for Black youth are worthy of our most immediate inquiry and response. Using gender *and* racial lenses to examine school-to-confinement pathways allows for an appreciation of the similarities and differences between females, males, and nonconforming students that is essential to shaping efforts that interrupt the pathways to confinement for *all* youth.

This book is written with love. We're in this struggle against racial oppression and patriarchy together, and unless we examine everyone's experiences, we lose the ability to support our girls and young women as they seek to bounce back from adversity, to be in their best health, to demand the best education, to earn a decent living, to be healthy partners, to help raise strong children who will thrive, and to play an integral part in shaping strong communities and a better world.