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Invisible Victims: Black Girls Within the School-to-Prison Pipeline Narrative

Refashioning Policy Through A Black, Queer, Feminist Lens

By

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Positionality

Before I present my thesis research, in the spirit of self-reflexivity, I want to acknowledge my standpoint. As a Black woman studying sociology, context has always been of interest to me. My research has always been, and will always be, concerned with amplifying the voices and experiences of those who have had to live within the context of being a second thought. Hearing their stories and analyzing how they shift our understanding of societal paradigms will always be my lens.

I am the daughter of two people who crossed forbidden oceans because of the promise of the American dream, only to realize that the dream was reserved for people who looked nothing like them. The daughter of two people who tucked so much of themselves away as a means of survival. I am the sister of a Black man who was, so violently and recklessly, a victim of the school-to-prison pipeline. The sister of a Black man whose mistakes of his youth cost him the trajectory of his life. I am a Black woman whose experiences with the pipeline have been seen and treated as less important than a Black boy's. I am a Black woman who has seen lifetimes of hope ripped out of her grip. I have been looking for justice for a long time; for my current self, my younger self, and for everyone who I see myself in. These identities are fundamental to how I choose to live, act, and research.

I understand and am aware of how those experiences may impact my ability, or inability, to write unbiasedly on this topic. This paper is written through a Black Queer Feminist Lens to further understand how and why Black girls are situated as the invisible victims of the school-to-prison pipeline. Meaning, my approach to understanding this issue will be intersectional and rooted in radical Black feminist and LGBTQ+ traditions for the sake of Black collective liberation.

My work is unapologetically committed to highlighting the voices and experiences of Black girls. Writing this thesis was a means of survival and an unapologetic, radical act of Black femininity.

Language Clarification

The power of word choice

I will use the term "societally impacted" rather than marginalized or minority. This places responsibility back on the systems and structures that have caused irreversible damage, rather than on communities who have just tried to exist despite it all. I will use the term "criminal punishment system" rather than criminal justice system. There is nothing just about a system that, since its creation, has destroyed countless lives and perpetuated White supremacy in the name of public "safety". Lastly, when I use the terms "whiteness" or "upholding a whiteness", I am not only referring to white as a race, but also white as the status quo or social norm of being (able-bodied, upper middle class, cisgendered man, etc). By being intentional about the words and phrases that I am using, I hope that this thesis supports other bodies of work that value truth. Accuracy in language matters.

The power of narrative

Throughout the entirety of this paper, I will use the word "narrative". I mean one of two things: (1) Past, present, and future research surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline and (2) Conversations about the school-to-prison pipeline that occur outside of the academic ivory tower. The second narrative is especially important because people who are impacted by the pipeline are unlikely to have access to academic research regarding the issue. Even if they do have physical access to this information, the language that we use in educational spaces often aids in the policing and gatekeeping of knowledge. I believe when the school-to-prison pipeline is

abolished, it will not be because of the work that academics are doing; it will be because of the community. When academia did not, the community has always cared. The people affected by an issue are closest to the answer, yet furthest away from the power of having their voices be heard. At the end of the day, people are experts of their own experiences. No matter how thoroughly academics may research about the school-to-prison pipeline, they will never understand the true impact of the pipeline like someone who has been affected by it. I value conversations had about the issue outside of the academic sphere immensely. That being said, it is more than likely that I am using narrative to describe the latter of the two definitions.

Until Black women are free, none of us will be free

The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977

Introduction

Negative educational experiences dictate future contact with the carceral system. Evidence suggests that there is a connection between school-based exclusionary discipline practices and detrimental school and life outcomes, such as involvement in the juvenile punishment system (Goldstein, 2019). The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) refers to the systematic process of school-aged children entering the criminal punishment system via incarceration and detainment. This phenomenon suggests that public education institutions incubate criminals by harshly penalizing and criminalizing student misconduct and disproportionately affecting racially impacted communities, specifically Black children. The pipeline further explains the process of "criminalizing youth that is carried out by disciplinary policies and practices within schools that put students into contact with law enforcement," (Cole, 2020) has caused irreversible damage to societally impacted individuals. The layering of societally impacted identities (Black, queer, girl) aids in the disproportionate interaction between young students and the pipeline. Education inequality, poverty, zero-tolerance policies, and

school disturbance laws also contribute to this disposition. Plainly stated, the school-to-prison pipeline violently perpetuates the widening academic opportunity gap between white students and students a part of multiple societally impacted communities. Through the pipeline, the issues of inequity impact extend from classrooms into prisons. While there have been countless pieces of literature and research studies regarding the school-to-prison pipeline and its impact on the Black community, Black boys have always been at the forefront of concern. However, because of their intersecting societally impacted identities, Black girls have increased contact with the criminal punishment system through their educational experiences.

Historical eras and racially motivated policies like the "War on Drugs" or Bill Clinton's "Crime Bill" primed the agenda for the ways the public viewed and discussed young people's propensity to inflict harm on themselves and the society around them. In 1996, Hillary Clinton notably referred to Black children as "super predators" when defending the The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. Clinton stated "We need to take these people on, they are often connected to big drug cartels, they are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called super predators. No conscious, no empathy" (Cox 2016). This statement succeeded over two decades of politicalized rhetoric about poverty, drugs, crimes, and the increased threat to public safety catalyzed by President Nixon's 1971 declaration of the "War on Drugs" (Domestic Policy, News 2016). However, Hilary Clinton's novelty statement set the context for policing children by shifting the public approach from rehabilitation of school-age children to harsh and offensive measures under the guise of protecting the public from the unpredictable nature of crime, poverty, and drug trafficking, perpetuated by children. This expanded the network of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex by integrating public education into the carceral system (Lindberg, 2015). The relationships between

our government, education, policing, and incarceration create a system of barriers and circumstances that disproportionately lead the most societally impacted populations to confinement and containment. This pattern disproportionately affects the trajectory of Black student success both in their time within school systems and beyond. As America continues to prioritize the prison industrial complex, an abundance of Black minds are intentionally being left behind in classrooms across the nation.

Today, Student Resource Officers (SROs) are local police officers that work as an extension of the carceral system and school administration to enforce zero tolerance policies and detain students for committing acts that typically fall under the jurisdiction of school leadership (Lindberg, 2015). The presence of SROs in schools removes a level of agency and decision-making rights from administrators by placing the onus for punishing students on policies and regulation created to police criminals. For example, physical altercations on school grounds may result in a student arrest instead of a punishment more compatible with a campus' actual capacity or rehabilitative corrections that reduce interpersonal violence between students. *When Is a Police Officer an Officer of the Law: The Status of Police Officers in Schools*, Peter Price illustrates the ambiguity of policing in school and the inability for officers not police childrens' behavior as criminal behavior.

A larger and more nuisance concern arises when analyzing the contributors to criminality and how individuals are punished for committing crimes. Sociologist, Robert Merton, developed the idea of social strain theory, the theory asserting that individuals commit crimes because of the societal deficits that pressurize individuals to achieve socially excepted goals (American Sociological Association, 2009). Using Merton's theory and Price's aforementioned assertion on policing in school, we can predict that students who are most likely to face criminalized

behaviors are the individuals with the most social strain. Young Black girls sit at the praxis of two societally impacted identities, predisposing them to face increased strain from society that could lead to criminality in schools. However, rhetoric concerning abolition of the school-to-prison pipeline fixates on the experiences of Black boys despite the level of impact that comes from being in a subordinated gender group (Morris, 2019). Despite the several intersections of oppression young Black girls experience, prominent research about the school-to-prison pipeline does not center the experiences of individuals that are expected to be most impacted. The erasure of the Black girl experience perpetuates the oppression for Black people part of subordinated gender groups, while creating the inability to effectively dismantle STPP by not considering the populations with the most contact and negative experience with the system.

In this thesis, I move away from the centering of the Black boy experience within the school-to-prison pipeline in an effort to propel research towards acknowledging and serving Black girls, especially on the federal level. I challenge both academic and non-academic narratives regarding the school-to-prison pipeline by asking, how does My Brother's Keeper, a federal initiative with claims of being evidence-based, aid in the increased erasure of the experiences Black girls have with the school-to-prison pipeline? How and why has this erasure become normalized? What would the overall impact of a refashioned initiative that prioritized educational equity through a Black, Queer, Feminist Lens be?

Literature Review

The Carceral State

Policing, in all of its various shapes, exists to uphold white supremacy through profited social control. Each year, the carceral state (including, but not limited to, state and federal

prisons, local jails, immigrant detention centers, military prisons, and programs of probation and parole) makes the government at least $182 billion (Money of Mass Incarceration Prison Policy Initiative, 2017). Although mass incarceration has devastating financial impact on states, cities, and the families of incarcerated people, decades of financial incentives by the federal and government encourage the imprisonment of individuals for longer. The United States Justice Department distributes over $5 billion and federal grants to state and local governments, which has resulted in more arrests, incarceration and probation, and harsher sentencing (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021). Even in years where crime rates drastically declined the federal response has always been to increase funding for the Carceral State in order to make a profit, even if that profit comes at the expense of young lives.

Although the criminal punishment system intends to provide rehabilitation, prevent crime, and offer moral support for victims, it's impact has instead been mass incarceration, modern-day slavery, and the perpetuation of white supremacy (Davis, 2003). As an entity of social control, police leave no structure untouched, including education. It is important to understand the deeper connection between punitive school discipline, educational inequity, and the carceral state. This intersection is where the "mass criminalization and imprisonment of bodies different from the norm is the goal" (Alexander, 2012). The policing of and within academic spaces, especially knowing how valuable they are in our society, is a form of violence that is often so downplayed that it may be difficult to recognize its impact until after it has dangerously affected generations. In America, there is an intentional commitment to the carceral state that is inextricably linked to government financial gain, which directly relates to the number of people that are caught up in the criminal punishment system in the earliest stages of their lives (Abudu, 2017).

Needless to say, the link between the police state and education is one that doesn't come without devastating consequences. Once students are pushed into the hands of law enforcement because of their display of "antisocial behaviors", the damage is irreversible and the trajectory of their lives is forever shifted (Blake, 2011). These behaviors can present themselves as anything from back talking school personnel to scoring under the required level for a state test. So now, instead of being places for healing and growth, schools present themselves as a threat and tapestries of harm (violent police tactics, police humiliation, etc.), especially for students with societally impacted identities. And so long as they maintain themselves in that state, students will continue to pull back and resist, thus, the cycle continues. Additionally, police presence in schools has become a great coverup for societal shortcomings. And what better way to learn how to effectively cover up those shortcomings then to identify them as early as possible in the next generation. And while identifying societal shortcomings in students, police kill two birds with one stone by normalizing violent tactics and strategies that are used on the force. If children are introduced to the terrorism that is policing while they are young, they likely won't question the tactics as they age. They will believe that this is how things should be to maintain order. The police state plants itself in schools to protect its functioning even at the expense of children: in the 2008 Kids for Cash Scandal, Judges Michael Conahan and Mark Ciavarella were accused of accepting money in return for imposing harsh punishments on juveniles to increase occupancy at for-profit detention centers (Haight, 2016). America's deeply engraved participation in the Prison Industrial Complex means that there has always been more effort put towards federally funded prisons, rather than schools. To ensure profit even when lives are actively being destroyed.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline is defined as a "confluence of exclusionary educational policies in under-resourced public schools and a punitive juvenile justice system that fails to provide education and mental health services for most at-risk students and drastically increases the likelihood that these children will end up with a criminal record rather than a high school diploma" (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). The pipeline explicitly targets students who are already negatively impacted by systemic inequities because of their identities. The impact of the pipeline is exacerbated if the students have several intersecting impacted identities, such as being a Black queer girl (Morris, 2019).

What is now known as the Reagan Era was a clear example of the long-lasting effects of both domestic and foreign policy passed during this time. The Reagan Revolution and the implementation of harsher school discipline are inexplicably linked. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 was a response to the War on Drugs and it imposed new mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenders changing a rehabilitative system into a punitive system. Following the era, laws and policies that targeted specific communities continued to be passed. Congress authorized public-school funding subject to the adoption of zero-tolerance policies. Several policies and systems influence how educators interact with students whose demographics make them targets of the pipeline. Commonalities of the school-to-prison pipeline are zero-tolerance policies. These intolerance policies mandate severe predetermined consequences (i.e., out of school suspension and expulsion) as a response to specific types of student misbehavior regardless of the context (Supportive School Discipline, 2014). Zero tolerance policies came into play after the passing of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994. This Act required states that receive federal education funding to enforce gun regulations mandating schools to expel students for at least a year who

carried a firearm on any school-owned or operated property. The strict regulation was soon adopted into other areas of school behavior and punishment thus creating zero-tolerance policies.

Although they were created to ensure a safe school environment where any deviant act or misbehavior was to be punished, the policies were pushed further into school systems. Non-criminal offenses such as talking back, dress code violations, and truancy were added to a long list of student misbehaviors that were under the scope of zero-tolerance policies. Under the policies, the "three-strike" mentality was fostered in these school settings in an attempt to lessen repeat offenses. Once school officials identified unacceptable behavior from a student, there would be a probation period for the student and when the student received "three strikes," any offense, criminal or not, would result in suspension or expulsion. Zero-tolerance policies, such as the Gun-Free Schools Act and the three-strike policy, were meant to deter misbehavior by imposing harsh punishment without considering context or individual needs. Basically, rather than a student being told that they did a bad thing, they are told that *they* are bad. This is damaging because once a student internalizes their behaviors that they are told are negative, it is difficult for them to separate themselves as a person from the misconduct (Pesta, 2018).

Though originally a response to help protect school environments from serious offenses (i.e. selling drugs), zero-tolerance policies have in recent times been applied broadly to very minor offenses including talking back to school personnel and bringing over-the-counter medications onto school grounds. Severe disciplinary measures are taken against students albeit consistent findings that they are ineffective. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), zero-tolerance policies are not associated with improved school safety and academics (2008). The main reason that these policies are ineffective is that they do not take into

consideration the systemic shortcomings that have affected certain populations. Rather, they operationalize inequity in the educational system as a lack of effort/ability from students.

Furthermore, according to Cramer (2014), these policies are unsuccessful because they focus only on punishment and fear rather than prevention and avoidance. When students are punished through the use of zero-tolerance policies, the misconduct is seldom addressed. By using the policies, the education system addresses symptoms of a problem rather than the problem itself. Laws and policies like these are not only ineffectual but harshly dictate how discipline is conducted in classrooms. Educators are expected to uphold these standards even at the expense of a child's education. Consequently, these policies can be used as a scapegoat for managing students who do not fall into normative academic standards. Educators can abuse these policies by relying on them for the majority of disciplinary actions even when they are not called for. This leads to a separation between students and educators and creates an unhealthy classroom climate for all. A Justice Policy Institute 2009 research study further shows that the policies have never been effective. In fact, it states that increased juvenile incarceration did not see a decrease in crime in the same duration (Justice Policy Institute, 2009).

Black Girls

Black girls are specifically targeted by the school-to-prison pipeline because of their intersecting societally impacted identities. The intersection of race, gender, and class make Black girls especially as susceptible to educational inequity. The National Black Women's Justice Institute analysis of civil rights data collected by the U.S. Department of Education found that Black girls are the only group of students who are overrepresented among the entire continuum of discipline in schools (Morris, 2014). While both Black girls and Black boys share a common risk of harsher punishment in school, Black girls face a far greater chance of school suspension

and expulsion in comparison to other students of the same gender. In 2015, a report by the African American Policy Forum and Columbia Law School's Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies found that Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts, in comparison to Black boys who are three times more likely. Black students of both genders face exclusionary discipline practices in school, but the reason for their interaction with the pipeline differ based on societal inequities. Black boys typically face punishment in schools because of their perceived threat to public safety, while Black girls are often over disciplined because of their non-conformity to white femininity. The cases in point are endless:

- In 2015, 16-year-old Shakara was grabbed by her neck, body slammed, and dragged by a South Carolina police officer because she had been "disruptive". Her classmate, 16-year-old Niya, was also arrested after calling the police officer abusive.
- Kiera Wilmot, a 16-year-old Florida honors student, was arrested and taken to a juvenile detention center after a science experiment went wrong. The experiment reaction (a small cloud of smoke expelled from a bottle) caused no damage to school property and endangered no one. She was charged with possessing and discharging a weapon.
- 16-year-old Ashlynn Avery was hit with a book by her teacher after falling asleep in school, though it was known that she suffered from diabetes, asthma, and sleep apnea. When she kept falling asleep, the police were called and she was severely beaten, then arrested.
- Desre'e Watson, age 6, was arrested for having a temper tantrum in her kindergarten classroom. She was taken to county jail and later charged with a felony and two misdemeanors.

For Black girls, the process of identity formation can be a complicated one, especially when they live in a society that values white norms. Erikson believed that for one's identity to be completely developed, they had to create a coherent sense of self, which includes what their identities are in relation to other people and spaces that they are in. In stage 5, Identity vs Role Confusion, Black girls may misunderstand themselves and believe their job is to be Black women because they experience a very specific type of age-compression (Morris, 2019). Throughout the lifecourse of Black girls, the narrative is pushed that they know how to "get things done". This harmful

rhetoric is tied directly to the perception of Black women and girls during slavery. Overtime, as context has changed, this same conversation has circulated society and eventually became a norm for Black woman- and girlhood. Instead of quiet, dainty, or soft, Black women are seen as loud, aggressive, and more masculine. It has become the basis of other dangerous narratives about Black femininity, such as the Strong Black Woman Schema and The Resilient Black Woman. Portrayals such as these were created to embrace the way that Black women change their own trajectories despite negative societal impact. However, they have indirectly caused more harm to Black woman- and girlhood because Black women and girls internalize these characteristics as ones they must have to be a *good* Black woman or girl.

Paired with the nonconformity to white femininity that Black girls and women naturally display, the adultification of Black girls ignore the pertinent issues that they face alone in school. Research has shown that educators view Black girls as needing "less nurturing, less protection, less comfort and support, and to know more about sex than their white peers" (Morris, 2019), and that these disparities are the greatest between the ages of 10 and 14, which falls within the age range of Erikson's "Identity vs Role Confusion". During the adolescent stage of a Black girl's life, she is trying to figure out who she is and how she fits into her society. She is establishing her place in the world. If the very place where she should feel safe to learn and make mistakes causes her a great deal of stress about her identity, imagine how she feels when she leaves the schoolhouse. When everyone around a Black girl expects her to be a Black woman, she becomes confused about her role in society and her community leading to a weak sense of self and negative overall well-being (Cherry, 2019). The external perception of a Black girl's adulthood while still being an adolescent is extremely dangerous. She is living in the body of a child and being expected to perform and react like an adult. School personnel may feel like she

needs less guidance than her peers and may be quicker to dish out punishment, whereas with white children they extend a more child-appropriate response.

Methodology

This research's theoretical framework interrogates the erasure of Black students with gender-subordinated identities by providing historically contextual evidence of racism, misogynoir, systemic inequality, and the impact it has on the school-prison nexus that informs this experience. An in-depth historical analysis will prime the foundation for identifying deficits in common approaches to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). This research will use former President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative as a case study for pinpointing the ways in which federal intervention has marginalized and displaced harm to Black girls when creating rhetoric about the school-to-prison pipeline. Policy analysis will uncover the ways erasure of Black girls becomes normalized and inform pathways forward for future policies to take a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline.

Evaluating former President Obama's policy through the lens of Black, Queer, Feminist theories and thought will illuminate the de facto inconsistencies that occur when transferring policy to practice and real-life experiences. Additionally, the research interrogates the culpability MBK and other similar policies have on adversely impacting Black girls, and pathways to remedy damage. The in depth analysis of the My Brother's Keeper Initiative is critical to understanding how and why Black girls are continuously a second thought in conversation happening about the school-to-prison pipeline. Utilizing theoretical framework from Black Queer Femenists is integral to effectively mitigating the cycle of erasure and oppression Black girls face in the school to prison pipeline. Creating intervention strategies for members of the

most societally impacted group gives the population an equitable chance at achieving success while still addressing the needs of other, less societally impacted groups.

Theoretical Framework

As I stated in my position positionality statement, my worldview, including the way I approach my research, is through a Black, Queer, Feminist lens to maintain Black radical tradition for the sake of collective liberation. That being said, I have decided to utilize Critical Race Feminism (CRF) as my theoretical framework for this paper. CRF seeks to be truly liberatory by considering oppression, power, and privilege. The theory requires a critical examination of the role of the law in perpetuating race and gender injustice in everyday experiences. I have chosen to analyze the ways and reasons Black girls are invisible victims of the pipeline on the federal level and CRF is the radical lens that is needed to discompose legal and societal paradigms. According to Adrien K. Wing (2003), there are several core themes in Critical Race Feminism:

> *"...the legal manifestation of White supremacy and the perpetuation of the subordinate status of people of color; the social construction of race; an acknowledgement of the reality that racism is endemic in American society; the use of narrative and storytelling, both fictional and autobiographical, as methodology; a recognition of a multidisciplinary approach to scholarship; the importance of praxis; a recognition of the role of feminism and Black feminism; and the acceptance of antiessentialism, intersectionality, and multiplicative identity"*

Critical Race Feminism recognizes the importance of personal narrative when it comes to defining and seeking justice for communities that have been impacted negatively by societal norms. CRF honors the voices of impacted individuals and challenges dominant research foci (Duncan, 2005). Critical Race Feminism furthers progressive research methods by acknowledging the power of intersectionality, and is especially concerned with disrupting the

erasure of experiences that don't align with whiteness. CRF encourages widespread recognition of the role of intersecting identities of race, gender, and class of societally impacted individuals. Further, the theory pushes for the interrogation of the damaging roles that policies, procedures, and laws play on both macro and micro levels.

Critical Policy Analysis of My Brother's Keeper (MBK)

Overview

On February 27, 2014, former President Barack Obama announced the creation of the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Initiative. At the time of its creation, MBK was the largest and most mainstream federal attempt to address the school-to-prison pipeline and its impact on Black boys and young men of color. Membership of the task force was drawn exclusively from federal agencies, and was directed to "assess current government policies, programs, and practices that improve life outcomes for Black boys and young men of color; recommend incentives, where appropriate, for the broad adoption of effective and innovative strategies; and work with external stakeholders to highlight opportunities and efforts for boys and young men of color" (The Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015). The My Brother's Keeper Initiative hits a political sweet spot that cannot be denied. Heidi Hartmann, who heads The Institute for Women's Policy Research, states that the initiative placates "some minority advocates as well as conservatives who perceive black boys as "dangerous." My Brother's Keeper "doesn't say the problem is racism [or that] the problem is communitywide", instead MBK's response displays societally impacted individuals as the root of this educational epidemic (IWPR, 2015). Additionally, the MBK Initiative has been situated as one of clear economic gain for American society. During several of former president Obama's press releases regarding the initiative he states that "improving life prospects and outcomes for young people, including young men of color, is the

right thing to do for our economy and the future of our country". And while there is mention of

the impact that it will have on students as individuals, there's always a point mentioned to tie

their individual meaning into greater economic advancement for America as an entity. Aside

from the fact that comments like these support the harmful narrative that only boys and men have

the ability to positively impact the American economy, these comments also diminish the

meaning of the lives of Black boys and young men of color to what they can contribute fiscally.

When the goal of a society is economic gain, even interventions deemed to help the people can

be more damaging than helpful.

Further playing on that political sweet spot and depending on the intended impact of the

information presented, language repeatedly teeters between gender inclusive and exclusive to

validate the creation of the task force. At times,it is said to cater to all young people, and other

times it is geared towards Black boys and men of color specifically. As displayed in these quotes

given by former President Obama on the official initiative page states:

> *That's what 'My Brother's Keeper' is all about. Helping more of our young people stay on track. Providing the support they need to think more broadly about their future. Building on what works – when it works, in those critical life-changing moments.*

> *MBK is about obliterating the barriers our kids face. It's about building strong, lasting bridges to opportunity for boys and girls, young men and young women, no matter what their background or the circumstances into which they were born. It's about investing in what works, acting with a sense of urgency, basing strategies on data and evidence, and having the courage to call-out and tear down discrimination in every system and policy where it shows up.*

> *By realizing this vision, we are creating a brighter, more promising future, not just for our boys and young men of color, but for our country.*

The Problem

While the intention of the task force was clearly to provide targeted aid to Black boys and

young men, in the 90 day interim report (MBK90) delivered by the White House, the language

being used to describe the target population was more inclusive, stating several times the task force was designed "in accordance with the principle that Federal programs may not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, color, or national origin"(MBK90, 2014). The report then goes on to state that MBK was in fact created to increase opportunities for all youth, however, gendered language that is exclusively centered around boys and men is used. In cases that gender specific language is used, there is an intentional, almost borderline violent, effort to exclude Black girls and their experiences. For example, the shortening of LGBT into GBT, to intentionally exclude lesbians. Historically, the shorten of the acronym in that manner has been used in the past to perpetuate misogyny within the Black queer and trans community, and by the MBK90 report doing so on a federal level, a very clear message is sent about who can be served by the task force.

An in depth look at MBK through Critical Race Feminism shows that the initiative is based on misinformation and a complete lack of understanding regarding the complex lived experiences of Black girls. By focusing solely on Black boys and young men of color, the MBK initiative assumes that this population is either "needier than females, less well served by current programs than are females, or more deserving of attention from government and the private sector than are females" (IWPR, 2015). The reasoning behind the intentional exclusion of Black girls has never been addressed by MBK, though it has been claimed to be evidence based on several written and oral occasions. The initiative includes several sets of data that highlights race and ethnicity as factors of educational inequity, but gender based data never seems to be included. The fact that Black girls experience similar, and even higher rates of school push out is not considered in the 90 day interim report, or in the initiative's research foundation at all. Black girls are completely excluded from the MBK90 interim report except for very brief discussions

of single parent families, domestic violence, and teenage pregnancy. However, all of these issues are discussed from the point of view of young men and boys as the true victims. In the formation of MBK, 44 indicators were identified and monitored to track the progress of the initiative in the lives of Black boys and young men. The indicators included statistical information regarding things like family structure, living arrangements, poverty, and disabilities, all of which can easily be applied to the experiences of Black girls. Out of the 44 indicators, about a quarter show that Black girls are more severely impacted by these societal inequities (less school understanding regarding disabilities, child poverty, family violence, illicit drug and alcohol use, etc.) and over half show that Black girls and Black boys are equally as impacted by specific societal inequities (limited college enrollment, less median earnings, truancy, healthcare disparities, etc.). And yet, the MBK Initiative makes no true effort to unpack and highlight the information that would come from the complete data analysis. The blatant denial of the existence of the Black girl experience proves that even at the federal level, Black girls are seen as second class citizens.

Whether the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes was intended or not, that was, and continues to be, the impact of MBK on how Black girls are situated within the pipeline narrative. Had Black girls been a focus in the conversation, the data and results provided by MBK would look much different. Not only does centering the experiences of Black boys and young men of color not account for the rampant marginalization that Black girls experience, it also primes the audience to continue to center conversations solely around school-aged boys. Because of the visibility of MBK, former President Obama and his administration are positioned as subject matter experts on the school-to-prison pipeline. The novelty of this phenomenon sets the context to which this issue will be discussed and replicated throughout smaller community organizations, via a type of trickle down programming. The harmful rhetoric that MBK perpetuated by erasing

the experiences that Black girls have with the school to prison pipeline undoubtedly allowed for the continuation of false narratives in more intimate spaces where Black girls have most interactions.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with gearing interventions towards Black boys. The challenges they face with race and class violence result in the very real need for unique intervention, programming, and support on both federal and community levels. However, intentionally miscommunicating data and research to make it seem as though Black boys are the most impacted by educational inequity, specifically the school-to-prison pipeline, becomes dangerously problematic because it aids in the continued erasure of the most societally impacted communities. You can't make claims of a liberatory goal, then only attempt to save just half of the community.

Initiative Refashioning: Onward and Upward

Why Refashion?

Before refashioning My Brother's Keeper, it is imperative to understand how and why Black girls are situated as the invisible victims of the pipeline. Much of the conversation about this national epidemic is centered around Black boys, despite consistent evidence that Black girls are impacted by the pipeline just as much as Black boys. However, it seems that though research has proven that Black girls should be studied thoroughly when dealing with the school-to-prison pipeline, they are rarely given the time and attention needed to disrupt the pipeline's path. In their 2011 research article, *Ring the Alarm: Black Girls in the Discourse on the School-to-Prison Pipeline,* Jamila J. Clark and colleagues found that Black girls were overrepresented in all disciplinary sanctions. Clark concluded that there are three primary ways that Black girls are decentered in the narrative surrounding the pipeline: (1) Black girls are non-existent in the

argument (All Students Matter), (2) The narrative is racialized, but not gender-driven (All Black Students Matter), and (3) The narrative is hyper-focused on Black boys (Black Male Students Matter).

All Students Matter: Co Opting and Rewriting Black Students Out of the Narrative

People are encouraged to believe that the school-to-prison pipeline is simply an educational issue, rather than an extension of white supremacist values: All Students Matter. Clark states that the majority of the framing of the school-to-prison pipeline suggests that all students are impacted by the school exclusion, so there is no true need to highlight the issue in a race-based manner. For example, In 2002 *The New York Times* released "Becoming Fed Up With Zero Tolerance", an article encouraging readers to conceptualize the school to prison pipeline as a collective issue instead of that victimized specific communities. In an attempt to humanize the issue, the author profiles five students who were harshly impacted by school discipline but provided no specificity about the student's race or gender. After further investigations, researchers found that the student examples the author provided were instances involving Black girls despite the author's choice of language which suggested that male students were the true targets of harsh school discipline. As an early publication of research discussing the school-to-prison pipeline, succeeding research maintained gender-neural and masculinized language which is inaccurate of the actual population most impacted.

"Yes, and": The Problem with Focusing on Race and Why All Black Students Matter

The school to prison pipeline is an extension of the prison-industrial complex and a mechanism to fuel mass incarceration. The deep-rooted history of policing and incarceration is heavily informed by race, racism, and the systemic attempt to reinforce racial hierarchies post slavery. For example, Richard Nixon's domestic policy chief, admitted that Nixon created the

war on drugs to marginalize the Black community. Ehrlichman stated, "You want to know what this was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and Black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did" (Equal Justice Initiative 2016). This quote by President Nixon's policy chief highlights the systematic integration of racism in policing, incarceration, media, and politics and lives in the same ecosystem as the school to prison pipeline. The general concern around student incarceration and the more commonly known understanding of racialized policing practices predisposes the public to fixate on the racial component of the school to prison-pipeline. Previous researchers framed narratives with the intent of leading the public to believe that the pipeline equally impacts the Black community by not mentioning the impact of gender. In 2007 *The New York Times* featured an article about the school-to-prison pipeline that framed the issue solely as a Black one (without response to the impact of gender differences). For the majority of the article the author uses examples of Black girls who have been impacted by the pipeline, but makes no intentional effort to contextualize the Black girl experience in schools. The author goes on to use the experience of Black girls and women to highlight the experiences of Black people in general: All Black Students Matter. This "rhetorical move extends back to the 1960s movement toward Black liberation when activists were so concerned with promoting the interests of Black men that they failed to draw attention to the dual impacts of sexism and racism on women" (Clark, 2011).

Who Run the World? Boys!: Understanding the Pervasive Nature of Misogyny

It is important to remember that levels of privilege still exist within societally impacted communities. Misogyny positions men as emotionless providers and community pillars. The notion that an unknown systemic force can deteriorate the intended function of manhood creates rising concern among the public in a way that does not replicate itself with women. There's a sense of emasculation that occurs when we recognize a man that cannot adhere to societal standards. Additionally, the historical context of the deterioration of the Black nuclear family stems from political eras like the Clinton administration. For example, the Assistant Labor Secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote"The Negro Family: The Case For National Action," and held Black women responsible of the lack of Black men's economic advancement. Moynihan claimed that matriarchal household structures perpetuated poverty, crime, and a culture of "pathologies"(Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2021). This rhetoric illustrates the cognitive dissonance that occurs when we describe the tragedies Black men experience because of policing while critiquing and placing blame on Black women. Misogyny is pervasive and fuels the desire to "protect" and sustain a man's social hierarchy even when it means deprioritizing the experiences and needs of women. Society views women as a conduit to fulfilling a man's intended function, so tragedies that impact people of any race will prioritize men. This is the foundational premises of the working framework of erasing Black girls from discussions about dismantling the school to prison pipeline.

The utilization of the Black male crisis narrative erases the impact of the pipeline on Black girls. In 2013, Courtland Milloy published an article in *The Washington Post* titled, "Needed: More Black Men in School". The primary argument of this article is that Black men are the answer to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. First, the assertion that Black men

are both missing and the solution to the problems of suspensions and truancy negate the contributions and efforts of Black women teachers. Second, he ignores that Black girls face similar rates of suspension and truancy: Black Male Students Matter. Milloy does not provide evidence that Black boys are the only ones facing truancy and suspension, yet suggests an intervention aimed solely at Black boys. In this article, Black girls remain situated as the invisible victims of the pipeline through the framing of the problem and the proposed solutions. Simply putting Black men in schools will not get rid of the structural issues that the pipeline uses to perpetuate harm. Additionally, this argument fails to take into account Black teachers and administrators who are not men as well as Black girls who have been impacted by the pipeline.

To state it plainly, a refashioning of the MBK Initiative is needed because Black girls are brutalized and criminalized at similar, and sometimes higher, rates as Black boys, but attention has never been taken at the national level. The belief that the school-to-prison pipeline could ever truly be dismantled without addressing the unique, pressing needs of Black girls is completely divorced from reality. The refashioning of MBK needs to be rooted in three core practices: (1) race and gender responsive, (2) trauma-informed, and (3) evidence-based. Meaning, the initiative needs to be created and implemented specifically with Black girls in mind, based in research from a Black, Queer, Feminist lens. If Black girls are, yet again, a second thought, the initiative will fall short, perpetuate another tapestry of harm in her life, and cause unnecessary contact with the criminal punishment system.

Pathways Forward

Research proves that there must be a targeted effort to meet and exceed the needs of Black girls to ensure the disruptions of negative educational outcomes. When negotiating and navigating spaces, Black girls essentially have to choose to accommodate or downplay certain

aspects of their identity or assimilate into the dominant culture of the educational space in order

to avoid conflict or discrimination. Essentially, instead of schools being places of growth and

healing, for the Black girl, they act as spaces for violent dismissal. So long as schools act as

tapestries of harm in a Black girl's life, her behavior will continue to resist these spaces. The

human brain is wired to protect us when we feel threatened, and more often than not our attempts

to protect ourselves in violent situations is displayed through our behaviors.

Black girls seem to be the elephant in the room that no one knows how to address.

Because Black girls have been situated as the "other" for so long, no intentional time or effort

has been placed on understanding their complex experiences. Attention to detail would need to

be taken to create racial and gender responsive solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline. The

following pathways forward are race and gender responsive, trauma-informed, and

evidence-based.

1. ***Acknowledge the Breadth of the Punitive Disparities Facing Black Girls.***
2. ***Develop the Will to Meet Black Girls Where They Are.***
3. ***Devise Programs that Support Unaddressed Trauma that Black Girls Face.***
   a. In educational spaces where punishment is valued more than healing, it is more
      likely that Black girls will behave in ways that lead to discipline. Recognizing the
      lived, complex, and historical trauma of Black girls is the first step to ensuring
      that they are honored and feel valued in their educational spaces. An initiative that
      supports programming to help Black girls unpack their trauma before it affects
      their education, is an initiative that is dedicated to educational equity.
4. ***Encourage the Evaluation and Disruption of Risk Factors for Black Girls.***
5. ***Encourage the Implementation of Mentorship in Schools for Black Girls.***
   a. Oftentimes in educational spaces there is a failure to connect to Black girls
      because of the overall lack of understanding of their complex experiences.
      Positive learning community should be built by ensuring that each girl has at least
      one adult in the building that they feel comfortable going to in a moment of crisis.
      This person can also serve as the girl's liaison and advocate for them when it feels
      like no one else is willing to. For a Black girl, knowing that at least one person is
      always in your corner can be a trajectory shifting experience.

6. *Encourage the Removal of Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools, Especially Those that Target Black Girls Specifically.*
7. *Encourage the Review and Revising of Other School Policies that Funnel Black Girls Through the Criminal Punishment System.*
   a. All school policies should be reviewed utilizing a culturally competent policy measurement (such as the Educator's Scale of Student Equity) and, if found to be unsatisfactory, revised.
8. *Increase Funding to Smaller Organizations that Prioritize the Black Girl Experience.*
   a. In a society where money is the measure of validity, organizations that are putting a dedicated effort towards enhancing and highlighting the Black girl experience should receive national funding.
9. *Increase Funding to Research that Focuses Specifically on Interactions Between Black Girls and the School-to-Prison Pipeline.*
10. *Prioritize the Development of Community-Based Safe Spaces for Black Girls.*
11. *Recognize and Challenge the Adultification of Black Girls.*
    a. School personnel are in a unique position to prevent the age compression of Black girls from having a negative impact on their learning outcomes. Collective actions that can be taken to reduce the presence of adultification include: using age-appropriate language when describing Black girls and respecting how Black femininity differs from white femininity. Black girls are not too much, too aggressive, or too loud. They are appropriately responding to the erasure they have been subjected to since birth. Black girls want to be seen.
12. *Remove Police Officers From Schools. And Further, Abolish the Police State.*
    a. The presence of police in schools has always been, and will always be, a threat of violence. In a space that is supposed to prioritize learning and aid in healing, there shouldn't be a looming presence whose very existence evokes fear and uncertainty in the students. Policing in schools increases the likelihood that harsher punishment will be used when a student behaves in a way that is seen as inappropriate because schools begin to rely on adult police reactions to handle child behavior. Replacing police officers with personnel that support student care, such as respected community leaders, restorative justice facilitators, and counselors ensures that students feel like their non-educational needs are also being met.

Discussion and Analysis

In sum, Black girls are overpoliced and underprotected, at federal, state, and community levels. Generally, we understand that children should not be punished for the things that they cannot control, but we don't extend that same grace to Black girls because in many scenarios,

they are not seen as children. Black girls cannot continue to be punished for their identities. They cannot continue to be seen as second-class citizens, as more "adult" than they are, as able to pull themselves out of an issue that they had no role in creating.

Research has shown that because of the complexities of their experiences, there should be an intentional effort to understand the needs of Black girls, both in and out of the classroom. There is no single way to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, as there are a number of populations impacted by the epidemic. Each societally impacted community's experience is unique to them and should be treated as such. Any attempt to be neutral and overgeneralized while dealing with the pipeline will be harmful because there is no possible way to address every symptom of the issue with the same treatment, especially with such a violent and relentless cycle such as the pipeline. Regardless of the intention, Black girls' experiences and voices will still be erased if they are not explicitly mentioned and advocated for.

Federal initiatives, such as former President Obama's My Brother's Keeper, must actively respond to the lived, complex, and historical trauma of Black girls. Though research has proved that Black girls are disproportionately represented along every disciplinary sanction, there is still little effort to reduce their interactions with the pipeline. The causes of harm between Black boys and Black girls are different, but one is not less important than the other. When we focus all effort towards Black boys while attempting to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, we send the message that Black girls are less important loud and clear. Utilizing a Black, Queer, Feminist lens will inform research, policy, and interventions that can disrupt the pipeline for Black girls. The changes that are made have to be intentional and data-driven.

Countless researchers have flagged the importance of centering Black girls in the fight for educational equity, and still, a great deal of existing literature fails to include girls in the

analysis, allowing for the belief that they are not also at risk. Once analyzed, it was found that there are three primary ways Black girls are situated as invisible victims of the pipeline: (1) Black girls are non-existent in the argument (All Students Matter), (2) The narrative is racialized, but not gender-driven (All Black Students Matter), and (3) The narrative is hyper-focused on Black boys (Black Male Students Matter). With the investment difference being this drastic, it is impossible to believe that certain populations are not expected to end up in, and even pushed into, prison. To combat this, funding should be redistributed from prisons into other beneficial facets. This reallocation of federal funding from prisons to schools will result in more Black girls seeking out higher education and fewer having first-hand experiences with the criminal punishment system (Abudu, 2017).

Conclusion and Next Steps

The very formation of the United States is rooted in things like racism, sexism, classism, so it is to be expected that those processes seep their way into every aspect of the nation, education being no exception. Although educators and other school personnel may not intentionally be trying to harm a Black girl, personal biases and school policy does it anyway. Although educators and other school personnel may not intentionally be trying to harm a Black girl, personal biases and school policy does it anyway. There is no reason, that isn't divorced from reality, to believe that the system of American education is neutral and untouched by the "isms" that this nation founded itself on. White supremacy and its perpetuators have created a society where people are more likely to question a person with marginalized identities about their role in their own oppression, rather than to evaluate the systems that have gone unchanged for centuries. In relation to the narrative surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline, instead of schools questioning why Black girls may be perceived to be displaying behaviors that are

inappropriate and worthy of discipline, this issue is simply boiled down to individual level shortcomings, which allows for the continuation of harmful cycles. From the bottom-up it can be concluded that the unique school experiences of Black girls need to be considered if the goal is to truly understand how developmental pathways interact with educational inequities. A Black girl's educational experience is both contextual and social and it should be treated as such. There are distinct differences between, within, and because of gendered and racial groups but historically, initiatives have not analyzed and internalized these differences. In examining how education is situated in relation to white supremacy, research should find that the two are more similar than once believed. Knowing this, it is the job of the school to inform themselves on the needs of Black girls in academic settings. What we have gotten comfortable with doing has not and will not work for Black girls. Equal responsibility falls on initiatives and policy coming from the federal level. In depth analyses of current narratives (both academic and non-academic) relating to the pipeline is necessary to understand how to completely dismantle this cycle of violence against the next generation.

The issue of the school-to-prison pipeline is much more complex than previously understood. The fact of the matter is Black girls are constantly erased and excluded from research, theories, and real life solutions. Without addressing the most marginalized within an issue, there is no hope of dismantling oppressive, problematic systems and structures. Black, queer, disabled girls are disproportionately being pushed through the pipeline everyday and yet their existence is still ignored. While we continue to look past their experiences, they are the answer we have been looking for - hope and change will come through and from them. There is a hyperfocus on Black boys and their adverse educational experiences and this focus causes the needs of Black girls to consistently be unmet. The causes of harm between Black boys and Black

girls may be different, but they are both equally as important when it comes to disrupting the pipeline. It is essential that future research, initiatives, and interventions surrounding the pipeline aim to be as intersectional and gender responsive as possible. Moving forward Black girls should be centered in this narrative by creating intersectional race and gender-responsive solutions. This may seem like a radical order, but it is not. This is a plea for the lives of Black girls. This is a plea for humanity. Ultimately, we must commit to the notion of education as freedom work and do everything in our power to honor and meet Black girls where they are in their own unique journeys, because until we are all liberated, none of us will be.

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