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Black Girls and School Discipline: The Complexities of Being Overrepresented and Understudied

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Abstract

Using Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism as guiding conceptual frameworks, this mixed-methods empirical study examines Black girls' exclusionary discipline outcomes. First, we examined disciplinary data from a large urban school district to assess racial group differences in office referral reasons and disparities for Black girls in out-of-school suspensions, law enforcement referrals, and expulsions. Next, we used a multivariate analysis to determine whether these patterns held after accounting for other identity markers. Finally, we used Critical Discourse Analysis to consider whether office referrals for Black girls were for subjective or objective behaviors and whether they aligned with dominant narratives.

Keywords

Black girls, school discipline, racism, School-to-Prison Pipeline

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On Monday, October 26, a video of Police Officer Ben Fields entering a classroom and assaulting a young Black girl[1] as she sat quietly at her desk exploded on social media. In the video, Fields, a White male, can be seen grabbing the seated Black girl around her neck, flipping her over in her desk, and dragging her across the floor. Another video of the same incident shows a Black male adult standing idly by and watching the entire incident unfold. Students are seen with their heads down or watching the violence unfold silently. Only one young Black girl, Niya Kenny,[2] stands up to Fields, crying, "What the fuck did she do?" to which Field's responds, "Hey, I'll put you in jail next." Kenny, was the second young Black girl arrested at Spring Valley that day. The #AssaultatSpringValleyHigh highlights how schools can be sites of racialized and gendered terror for Black girls.

In this article, we explore the ways urban schools perpetuate intersectional violence against Black girls through school discipline disparities in Denver Public Schools (DPS), an urban school district. It is important to note that we are conceptualizing urban based on

> (1) *the size* of the of the city in which the schools are located: dense large, metropolitan areas; (2) *the students* in the schools: a wide range of student diversity, including racial, ethnic, religious, language, and socioeconomic; and (3) *the resources*: the amount and number of resources available in a school, such as technology and financial structures through federal programs as well as property taxes. (Milner & Lomotey, 2014, p. xv)

The city of Denver houses a population of 663,862 and is the largest metropolitan area in Colorado (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The total student population of DPS as of October 2014 was 90,150 including 0.6% American Indian, 3.3% Asian, 14.1% Black, 56.7% Hispanic, 3.4% Other, and 21.9% White. The English Language Learning population compromised 38.8% of the total population and 69.69% were on free and reduced lunch[3] (DPS, 2015). The resources of DPS are limited with an average state per pupil spending being US$6,872.87, whereas the wealthy Aspen 1 school district receiving US$8,381.96 per pupil. Therefore, in all ways, DPS qualifies as an urban district.

However, it is important to note that schools as sites of racialized and gendered violence are not only urban schools in the ways Milner and Lomotey (2014) describe. In another study of racialized disciplinary disparities in Colorado, it was found instead that these disparities existed wherever children of color went to school, whether the districts be defined as urban, suburban, or rural (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014). Furthermore, when considering the highly publicized assault of a young Black girl at Spring Valley High School, the school itself is not considered urban. Richland

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County, where Spring Valley High is situated, is described as "in the center of SC. The community is a mixture of suburban, rural and military families" (Richmond School District, 2015). However, the school is 72% minority. Some scholars describe urban areas as a socially constructed place where lower income people of color have been ghettoized, marginalized by Whites (Massey & Denton, 1993). Leonardo and Hunter (2007) note that "the urban is socially and discursively constructed as a place, which is part of the dialectical creation of the urban as both a real and imagined space" (p. 779). Moreover urban areas are largely thought of as a Black space, one that Black people are viewed as carrying with them as they venture into White spaces (e.g., city's public spaces such as parks, middle-class or white-collar workplaces, middle-upper class neighborhoods, schools; Anderson, 2015). Understanding how students are considered to be the carriers of "urban" even when they are not in urban places expands ways urban schools are conceptualized. This is not to argue that urban *should* be a proxy for race, only that the two words are often considered synonyms. When students of color are considered to be carrying the ghetto with them, it is easier to see how they are then hyper-surveilled in spaces such as schools and punished more quickly. We argue in this article that for Black girls, disproportionate surveillance and punishment often occurs through the application of dominant narratives.

School discipline has increased links to criminalization because of a national commitment to a carceral state, one governed by carceral logics of punishment of the disposable (Annamma, in press; Foucault, 1977). It is important to contextualize punitive school discipline practices and the School-to-Prison Pipeline as part of this larger carceral state, where the mass criminalization and imprisonment of bodies different from the norm is the goal (Alexander, 2012). In view of these racialized patterns of punishment, scholars, educators, and advocates have argued that the goal of equity for students of color in public education cannot be realized without disrupting racial disparities in school discipline practices (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Black Girls Are Invisible in School Discipline Literature

Young men of color have increasingly been the focus of discussions regarding urban school discipline and criminality (Caton, 2012). Although attending to the issues Black males face is indeed important, the dearth of scholarship around Black girls' experiences have rendered them largely invisible in criminalization discussions, even though Black girls are disproportionately affected by the relationships between urban educational and carceral

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institutions (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Winn, 2011; Wun, 2014). Specifically, Black girls often experience exclusionary discipline outcomes more than many males across the country, a trend that is paralleled in the criminal legal system (Chesney-Lind, 2010; Tate et al., 2014). Consequently, there is a need for research to better understand Black girls' experiences with discipline in urban schools, particularly studies that demonstrate how national trends occur in local contexts and potential reasons for these patterns.

What is known about Black girls' experience with urban school discipline and the Pipeline is disheartening. In the last decade, Black girls have had the fastest growing suspension rates of all students (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Nationally, Black girls experience discipline rates 6 times higher than White girls; they experience suspension rates higher than 67% of boys as well (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). These trends do not appear to be the result of more serious offending patterns among Black girls. For example, Blake, Butler, Lewis, and Darensbourg (2011) examined the reasons that Black girls were suspended in one urban school district and found that, "Black girls were most often cited for defiance followed by inappropriate dress, using profane language toward a student, and physical aggression" (p. 100). In general, racial disparities in exclusionary school discipline outcomes appear to be driven by minor infractions and subjective categories of student misconduct, rather than more objective and serious behaviors such as bringing a weapon to school (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

The increased likelihood of suspension among Black girls is also linked to their greater probability of being incarcerated. Wald and Losen (2003) note, "the 'single largest predictor' of later arrest among adolescent females is having been suspended, expelled or held back during the middle school years" (p. 4). Due to increased coordination between urban educational and carceral institutions, the association between exclusionary discipline outcomes and later imprisonment has likely strengthened over time. Nationally, Black girls represent 31% of girls referred to law enforcement by school officials and 43% of those arrested on school grounds, but only constitute 17% of the overall student population (National Women's Law Center & NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2014). Once entangled in the criminal system, the disparities continue, as Black girls tend to receive harsher sentences than other girls for the same offenses (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Many of these outcomes are linked with lower achievement later in life (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008).

These statistics are important but still tell very little about the processes and practices that affect Black girls' experiences with the Pipeline (Ferguson,

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2000). Crenshaw et al. (2015) note, "investigations into *why* Black girls are much more likely to be harshly disciplined than other girls have been few and far between" (p. 26, emphasis added). This study considers whether Black girls are overrepresented in exclusionary disciplinary actions in a local, urban context and through what mechanisms.

Such a focus on Black girls and discipline in urban schools is essential because it can inform urban education research through a more rigorous analysis about the intersectionality of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). The field needs an analysis that is simultaneously raced and gendered because discipline reform efforts targeting racial discipline gaps do not usually differentiate strategies by sex (e.g., Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). These "gender-neutral" policy and intervention recommendations appear to reflect two major assumptions that (a) Black male issues of overrepresentation in the Pipeline are the more pressing problem and (b) Black males and females are disciplined for identical reasons and, therefore, need similar interventions (Morris, 2012). Yet, findings from the extant literature on the experiences of Black girls in schools and Black women in society more broadly suggest that social constructions of gender and femininity intersecting with race shape their educational outcomes (Blake et al., 2010; DeBlase, 2003). In particular, issues of U.S. societal gender norms around femininity are important to pay attention to because these norms are oftentimes aligned with White, middle-class values (Annamma, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1998); consequently Black girls, like Black women, tend to experience excessive surveillance and punishment if their personalities or attire diverge from what society and, by extension, educational institutions expect (Blake et al., 2010; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Richie, 2012). We believe that dominant narratives about Black girls reify the social processes that funnel Black girls out of urban schools and into prisons. These dominant narratives place these already vulnerable girls in danger of pathologization and criminalization (O'Connor, Mueller, & Neal, 2014).

Purpose

This empirical study contributes to the small but growing body of literature about Black girls and school discipline by examining exclusionary discipline outcomes among this group in DPS, a large urban school district. First, we examine descriptive disciplinary data to assess racial group differences in office referrals and whether Black girls are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline outcomes. Next, we use multivariate models to determine whether these patterns hold after accounting for other identity markers. Finally, we

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use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to consider what mechanisms moved girls into the Pipeline by examining whether disciplinary actions were for subjective or objective behaviors and whether they align with dominant narratives about Black girls.

Specifically, the following research questions guided our investigation:

Research Question 1: Are Black girls (a) disproportionately represented in certain office referral categories and exclusionary discipline outcomes and (b) still disproportionately represented after accounting for other identity markers?

Research Question 2: Do the reasons why Black girls are referred align with (a) subjective or objective behaviors and (b) dominant narratives about Black girls?

Conceptual Framework

Theory grounds how researchers identify, name, interpret, and write about Black girls' experiences with school discipline. Consequently, it is imperative to identify theories that reflect Black girls' historical and social location and that of others with whom they interact in their world. We therefore situate this mixed-methods study within Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Feminism (FemCrit) to understand how the nuanced ways in which Black girls are disciplined are affected by dominant narratives about who Black girls are in society—historically and contemporarily.

Fredrick Douglas, Mary Church Terrell, and Bayard Rustin were all intellectual ancestors of CRT, foregrounding race, highlighting the voices of the marginalized, and pushing for an intersectional analysis of oppression. Legal scholars of color developed CRT to counter Critical Legal Studies (CLS) when CLS engaged in a class-based analysis but was absent a race analysis (Bell, 1979; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Matsuda, 1987). Scholars in education took up CRT to address disparities in education resources that led to racialized outcomes (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT transcended disciplines to address racialized intersections with language, immigration status (LatCrit), sexuality (QueerCrit), and more (Mckinley & Brayboy, 2005; Misawa, 2010; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). To address the deep intersections between race and gender, CRT scholars also developed FemCrit (Wing, 2003).

CRT is an important framework for this study because prevailing narratives regarding Black girls are connected to the ways in which race operates in U.S. society and schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Black girls, who are a sub-group of Black people in the United States, are a part of a collective that

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has been positioned historically as inferior simply because of the color of their skin for generations. CRT centers these facts about race and racism, and suggests that there will always be a majoritarian story, a story told by the powerful about the marginalized, about race, and that Black girls are a part of that story (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT also exposes how laws, policies, and practices that are considered neutral actually reinforce normative standards of Whiteness, and how these norms problematize bodies that differ from these ideals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Goodwin, 2003). These processes of everyday racism lead to pathologizing individuals who are different, diagnosing differences as inherent deficits instead of socially constructed (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). In other words, Blackness is viewed as the problem instead of racism, and specifically, anti-Blackness. CRT is also helpful in thinking about not just theory but also praxis, in practice and policy, for educational reform related to Black girls (Parker & Stovall, 2004).

In addition, Black girls experience multiple marginalized identities, an issue viewed through a single lens (e.g., race or gender) that limits understanding of ways gender *interacts* with race (Wing, 2003). Therefore, we draw on FemCrit to build on CRT by recognizing these multiple identities of women and girls, acknowledging that girls of color have unique experiences different from White girls, White boys, and even boys of color (Crenshaw, 1993; Wing, 2003). In our study, we include comparison data of other girls of color and White girls with Black girls. Embedded within these numbers are social and educational contexts that are rooted in issues of power, systems of domination, social justice, and gender.

FemCrit highlights how sexism further compounds the ways Black girls are seen as deficit when they do not match standards of White femininity (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2012). One way Black girls are omitted from the right to education is through exclusionary discipline. By channeling Black girls out of schools and into carceral institutions, schools are protecting education for the most privileged (Wun, 2014). Said differently, education is a property right instilled by Whiteness, with the absolute right to exclude those outside of Whiteness (Harris, 1993). Finally, the politics of multiple oppressions Black females experience as a result of their race, class, and gender status are connected to a history of slavery and controlling images, such as the matriarch (Collins, 2000). These controlling images include the (a) Mammy or Matriarch, a woman who is nurturing, loving, and sexless; (b) Sapphire, the emasculating, overly aggressive, unfeminine, or masculine, and loud female; (c) Jezebel, as hypersexualized woman who pursues and initiates sex; and (d) The Welfare Queen, the woman who is conniving, loud, talks back, and is vampiric, sucking off the system by having children and refusing to work (Hancock, 2004; Mullings, 1994; Scott, 1982).

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Black girls can be shaped by these controlling images, and as we see in our results section, reasons for referrals are deeply connected to the dominant narratives about who Black girls are in society (Spillers, 1987).

As guiding conceptual frameworks, CRT and FemCrit provide several affordances by (a) refuting dominant discourses surrounding Black girls that lack supporting evidence, such as that Black girls are more deserving of incarceration due to their inherently violent nature (Chesney-Lind, 2010); (b) demanding a focus on counter-narratives, contrasted by the master narrative, counter-stories provide an opportunity to see Black girls not as inherently "bad," but as thoughtful young women maneuvering complex lives and institutions; (c) allowing for a better understanding of the experiences of marginalized Black girls to understand how hegemony is enacted and embodied, along with the ways students strive for dignity (Rios, 2011); and (d) problematizing singular notions of identity such as race or ability or gender (Crenshaw, 1993). These affordances allow us to bring different theories, methods, and questions to bear on racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline outcomes.

Method

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design of quantitative analysis followed by qualitative inquiry to utilize "different strategies, approaches, and methods in such a way that the resulting mixture or combination is likely to result in complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 18). Mixed-methods strategies require using data from both approaches to inform and enhance analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Green, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Sequentially, we first conducted quantitative analyses of school discipline data to identify patterns in office referral reasons and exclusionary discipline outcomes for Black girls. Second, we utilized CDA to qualitatively explore statistically significant associations to determine whether Black girls' office referral reasons were for objective or subjective behaviors and whether they aligned with dominant narratives about Black girls (van Dijk, 2002).

Study Site

DPS is the largest urban school district in Colorado and the fastest growing school district in the nation (DPS, 2014). In response to concerns voiced by community members, parents, and students, DPS reformed its discipline policy in 2008. The reforms aimed to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and law enforcement referrals in response to student misbehavior and to

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eliminate racial disparities in discipline. Rather than relying on exclusionary sanctions, the 2008 policy requires schools to implement restorative and therapeutic interventions as resolutions to misconduct and to only refer students to law enforcement when legally mandated to do so. Since the introduction of these policy changes, the district has lowered suspension and expulsion rates by nearly 40%, with reductions benefitting students of all backgrounds, particularly at the secondary school levels. To leverage the work in Denver to inform the broader knowledge base on school discipline, a researcher–practitioner partnership between DPS and the University of Denver (DU) was established in 2012 (Anyon et al., 2014). This partnership identified the experiences of Black girls as a priority for inquiry, given the absence of attention to this population in the community and scholarly literature.

Sample

Quantitative. The cross-sectional data set used in this study included all *disciplined female* students ($N = 3{,}628$) in Grades K to 12 who were enrolled in DPS ($n = 183$) during the 2011-2012 school year. The sample of disciplined female students was 57% Latino, 9% White, 29% Black, 1% Asian, 3% multiracial, 0.9% Native American, and 0.1% Pacific Islander. In contrast, the racial composition of *all female* students in the school district was 58% Latino, 20% White, 15% Black, 4% Asian, 3% multiracial, 0.8% Native American, and 0.2% Pacific Islander. Black girls were, therefore, significantly overrepresented in the population of disciplined female students in this school district, mirroring national trends. In other words, Black girls made up 29% of disciplined girls, but were only 15% of the female population. Native American and Pacific Islander youth were included in descriptive analyses, but were dropped from the multivariate models due to their small numbers.

Sixty-five percent of disciplined female students were designated as English proficient (see Table 1). Eighty-four percent of disciplined female students were eligible for free and reduced lunch and 4% of these students were identified as homeless during the school year of interest. Ten percent participated in the gifted and talented program, 14% participated in special education, and 2% were classified as having an emotional disability.

Table 1 illustrates that disciplined Black girls were significantly more likely than disciplined girls from all other racial backgrounds to be eligible for free and reduced lunch (86% vs. 84%), homeless (7% vs. 4%), English proficient (93% vs. 65%), have a disability that meets eligibility criteria for special education (18% vs. 14%), and be classified as having an emotional disability (4% vs. 2%). The only demographic category in which Black girls were significantly underrepresented was eligibility for gifted and talented

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Table 1. Sample Descriptives: Racial Differences in Demographic Characteristics of All Disciplined Female Students.

	Native (n = 33)	Asian (n = 44)	Black (n = 1,050)	Latinas (n = 2,085)	White (n = 309)	Pacific Islander (n = 2)	Multiracial (n = 105)	All (N = 3,628)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Eligible for free and reduced lunch	91	80	86†	90***	46***	50	78†	84***
Homeless	9	0	7***	2***	3	0	5	4***
English proficient	97***	25***	93***	46***	93***	100	91***	65***
Gifted and talented education	18	18†	6***	10	18***	0	10	10***
Students with disabilities	21	9	18***	13***	17	50	11	14**
Classified as having an emotional disability	0	2	4***	2***	3	0	2	2**

Note. Statistical significance was determined using Pearson chi-square methods comparing rates from each sub-group with all other female students. Overall group differences are reflected in the "All" column.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

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education (6% vs. 10%). In short, racial differences in demographic characteristics were statistically significant with Black girls more likely than most other girls to be disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic status and ability grouping. In light of these differences, all demographic characteristics were controlled for in the multivariate analyses.

Qualitative. Definitions for each category of office referral reasons written in the District Safety & Discipline Indicator (SDI) handbook provided the text for CDA analyses (SDI, 2013-2014). We used the handbook definitions because they provide authoritative guidance to school staff regarding how to classify discipline incidents for reporting to the state Department of Education (SDI, 2013-2014). In addition, whenever the research team requested information from the school district about the meaning of different discipline referral categories, we were referred to the SDI handbook. We used these definitions to help us understand how organizational texts and embedded discourses contribute to the reproduction of race and gender inequalities in schools (van Dijk, 1987). In this way, we treat the SDI as "'nodal' discourses, in the sense that they are discourses which subsume and articulate in a particular way a great many other discourses" (Fairclough, 2012, p. 463). For example, the SDI contains technical discourses (e.g., definitions of expectations and when to apply), governmental discourses (e.g., rules and regulations of governance of schools), and discourses of social inclusion (e.g., what compliance looks like) and social exclusion (e.g., when to remove and punish; Fairclough, 2005).

Measures

Demographic and discipline records were downloaded from the district's student information system (*Infinite Campus*), and included variables that reflect state, federal, and local policy mandates for data collection by educational agencies. Student racial categories were (a) American Indian or Alaska Native, (b) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, (c) Asian or Asian American, (d) Black or African American (non-Hispanic), (e) Hispanic or Latina, (f) White or Caucasian, and (g) multiracial. Each racial category was recoded into dummy variables. Additional student-level variables available in the data set were all dichotomous and included gender free and reduced lunch eligibility (eligible or not), special education status (active Individualized Education Program or not), designation as seriously emotionally disabled (emotionally disabled or not), identification as homeless (homeless or not), participation in the gifted and talented program (participant or not), and English proficient (English proficient or not).

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Other student-level variables included dichotomous indicators of whether or not a student was referred to the office over the course of a school year for each possible referral category, as defined in the district's discipline policy (González, 2012). These categories include destruction of school property, disobedience or defiance, bullying, detrimental behavior, other violations of the school's code of conduct, third-degree assault, first-degree assault, drug possession or distribution, and possession of a dangerous weapon. Likewise, data assessing students' experience of a discipline consequence were dichotomous. These variables indicated whether a student had received one or more of the following exclusionary discipline outcomes over the course of a school year: out-of-school suspension, referral to law enforcement, or expulsion. Expulsions were not included in the multivariate analysis due to low prevalence.

In the multivariate models, school-level covariates included the proportion of the student body that is Black or Latino and grade configuration (middle schools, high schools, and alternatively configured schools compared with elementary schools). These school-level covariates were included in light of findings from previous studies documenting a relationship between school racial composition, grade level, and discipline outcomes (Payne & Welch, 2010; Skiba et al., 2013). Specifically, secondary schools and highly segregated schools tend to use punitive discipline sanctions more widely, a practice that is associated with racial disparities in suspension and expulsion (Payne & Welch, 2010; Skiba et al., 2013). Finally, several additional school-level covariates were excluded because preliminary analyses revealed they did not independently contribute to students' risk of exclusionary discipline sanctions. These variables included school size and school type (traditional, alternative, or charter), and the proportion of the student body that was eligible for free and reduced lunch, not native English speakers, or had active placements in special education. These variables have not been consistently related to school discipline outcomes in other studies (Arcia, 2007).

Analytic Approach

Quantitative. To assess the disproportionate representation of Black girls in exclusionary discipline outcomes, bivariate analyses were conducted to identify associations between disciplined female students' racial background, office referral categories, and exclusionary outcomes using Pearson chi-square tests (see Tables 2 and 3). In these descriptive analyses, each subgroup of girls was compared with all other female students, and overall group differences were also assessed. Drawing on the statistically significant

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Table 2. Descriptive Analysis: Racial Differences in Office Referrals and Referral Reasons Among Disciplined Female Students in DPS (N = 3,628).

	Native (n = 33)	Asian (n = 44)	Black (n = 1,050)	Latinas (n = 2,085)	White (n = 309)	Pacific Islander (n = 2)	Multiracial (n = 105)	All (N = 3,628)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Detrimental behavior	48	36†	53**	49	44*	100	58†	50***
Disobedient/defiant	36	25†	42***	36	26***	0	40	37***
Other violations of the code of conduct	27	25	25	25	26	0	26	25
Bullying	3	16	9	10	8	0	10	9
Drug possession or distribution	15*	11	4***	6	9*	0	7	6**
Third-degree assault	0	2	5**	3*	4	0	2	4†
Destruction of school property	3	2	2	2	1	0	6**	2
Alcohol possession	3	7**	0.6**	1	3**	0	0	1***
Unlawful sexual behavior	0	2	1	0.8	2	0	1	1
Dangerous weapon	3	0	1	0.7	1	0	2	0.9
Robbery	0	0	0.9	0.6	0	0	0	0.6
Cigarette smoking	0	0	0.2	0.5†	0	0	0	0.3
Gang involvement	0	0	0.3	0.1	0	0	0	0.1
First-degree assault	0	0	0.1	0.2	0	0	0	0.1
Witness intimidation	0	0	0.1	0	0	0	0	0.0
Other felony	0	0	0	0	0.1	0	0	0

Note. Statistical significance was determined using Pearson chi-square methods comparing rates from each sub-group with all other female students. Overall group differences are reflected in the "All" column. DPS = Denver Public Schools.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

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Table 3. Bivariate Analysis: Racial Differences in Exclusionary Discipline Outcomes Among Disciplined Female Students in DPS (N = 3,628).

	Native (n = 33)	Asian (n = 44)	Black (n = 1,050)	Latinas (n = 2,085)	White (n = 309)	Pacific Islander (n = 2)	Multiracial (n = 105)	All (N = 3,628)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Out-of-school suspension	55	20**	52***	41***	31***	0	48	44***
Law enforcement referral	9	2	5	5	5	0	4	5
Expulsion	0	0	0.9**	0.2†	0	0	1	0.4

Note. Statistical significance was determined using Pearson chi-square methods comparing rates from each sub-group with all other female students. Overall group differences are reflected in the "All" column. DPS = Denver Public Schools.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

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referral categories and exclusionary discipline outcomes from the bivariate analyses, we then used a multinomial logistic regression model to identify the reasons that remained significantly associated with Black girls compared with White females after controlling for other identity markers (e.g., free and reduced lunch eligibility, special education status), along with their odds of experiencing an exclusionary discipline outcome after accounting for their referral reasons and demographics (see Table 4).

Qualitative. For this CDA, we used office referral categories that were statistically significant in the descriptive (bivariate) analysis, as these patterns most closely reflect the lived experiences of Black girls and the perceptions of school staff (whereas a multivariate analysis parses out different identity markers that are inseparable in students' and teachers' lived experiences). CDA allows for linking the "microinteractional phenomena (how speakers articulate race across multiple social axes through discursive practices) and macrosociopolitical processes (how ideologies and histories of race articulate with those of class, gender, sexuality, or whatever category of local significance)" (Alim & Reyes, 2011, p. 381). Therefore, CDA is an invaluable tool for exposing concealed ideologies in these referral definitions and linking them with dominant narratives about Black girls.

Using CDA, we began with deductive coding of discipline referral category definitions, sorting statistically significant referral reasons into analytic constructs of objective and subjective categories, based on previous research on racial differences in office referral reasons (Skiba et al., 2002). Using school district definitions, objective categories were defined as verifiable actions with a permanent product (e.g., vandalism) and subjective categories were defined as those based on perceptions (e.g., disobedience; Skiba et al., 2002). Then, patterns in Black girls' office referral reasons were examined inductively (Erickson, 2004) and compared with macrosociopolitical or dominant narratives about Black girls.

Findings

Our "Findings" section first shares quantitative results, and then we delve into the qualitative findings. Displaying our findings this way reflects the sequential mixed-methods design of the study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitatively, we begin with the bivariate analysis examining racial differences in the reasons for office discipline referrals and exclusionary disciplinary outcomes, and we end with a multivariate analysis. Qualitatively,

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Table 4. Multivariate Analysis[a]: Multinomial Logistic Regression Estimating Racial[b] Differences in Office Referral Reasons and Exclusionary Discipline Outcomes[c] Among Disciplined Female Students in DPS, Controlling for Other Identity Markers (Comparison Group = White Girls; *n* = 3,593).

	Asian (*n* = 44)	Black (*n* = 1,050)	Latinas (*n* = 2,085)	Multiracial (*n* = 105)
Detrimental behavior				
RRRe	0.90	0.99	0.97	1.32
CI	[0.40, 2.00]	[0.69, 1.43]	[0.68, 1.38]	[0.76, 2.30]
Disobedient/defiant				
RRR	1.02	1.79**	1.58*	2.03*
CI	[0.35, 2.94]	[1.19, 2.70]	[1.07, 2.34]	[1.09, 3.76]
Third-degree assault				
RRR	0.93	0.67	0.76	0.31†
CI	[0.12, 7.12]	[0.37, 1.19]	[0.44, 1.31]	[0.80, 1.22]
Drug violation				
RRR	2.98†	0.26***	0.72	0.55
CI	[0.96, 9.32]	[0.15, 0.47]	[0.43, 1.19]	[0.21, 1.42]
Alcohol violation				
RRR	6.58*	0.17*	0.45	[d]
CI	[1.43, 30.14]	[0.04, 0.76]	[0.15, 1.31]	[d]
Out-of-school suspension				
RRR	0.48	2.25***	1.97***	2.13**
CI	[0.20, 1.16]	[1.59, 3.19]	[1.41, 2.76]	[1.23, 3.63]

Note. DPS = Denver Public Schools; CI = confidence interval; RRR = relative risk ratio.
[a]Statistical control variables included students' free and reduced lunch eligibility, English language proficiency, eligibility for gifted and talented education, eligibility for special education, classification as emotionally disabled, school racial composition, and grade level.
[b]There were not enough Native or Pacific Islander students in the sample to include them in the multivariate analysis. White girls served as the reference group.
[c]This analysis only includes office referral reasons and exclusionary discipline outcomes that were significant at the bivariate level and had a large enough sample size for a multivariate model.
[d]No multiracial girls were referred for an alcohol violation.
[e]RRR assesses the strength of an association between two variables in one group, compared to another (in this case, girls of color compared to White girls). A value above one indicates increased risk, whereas a value less than one suggests reduced risk.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

we then consider the CDA results, exploring whether the definitions of office referral categories significantly associated with being a Black girl are objective or subjective (microinteractional) and how they aligned with dominant narratives about Black girls (macrosociopolitical).

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Bivariate Analyses

Office referrals reasons. Table 2 presents the proportion of female students who were sent to the office for each referral reason, by race. These categories (in order of overall severity) include destruction of school property (2% of all disciplined girls), disobedience or defiance (37%), bullying (9%), detrimental behavior (50%), other violations of the school's code of conduct (25%), third-degree assault (4%), first-degree assault (0.1%), drug possession or distribution (6%), and possession of a dangerous weapon (0.9%). Percentages do not add up to 100 because a sizable minority of all girls referred to the office (40%) was referred more than once during the school year, with a mean of two referrals per student.

Statistically significant differences between Black girls and females of other racial backgrounds were observed in five of the 16 referral categories. Black girls (49%) were most likely (37%) to have their behavior labeled as disobedient or defiant, followed by multiracial (40%), Latina (36%), and Native (36%) students. Black girls (53%) were significantly more likely than all other girls (50%) to be referred for behavior deemed detrimental, whereas White girls (44%) were significantly less likely to be referred to the office for this reason. Black girls were also significantly more likely than other girls to have referrals for third-degree assault (5% vs. 4%). However, Black girls were significantly less likely than all other girls to be referred to the office for possession of alcohol (0.6% vs. 1%) or drugs (4% vs. 6%). In contrast, Native (15%) and White (9%) female students were significantly more likely to be referred to the office for drug possession; whereas, Asian (7%) and White (3%) girls were significantly more likely to experience referrals for alcohol use.

Exclusionary discipline outcomes. Table 3 demonstrates exclusionary discipline outcomes resulting from office referrals by race. Significant racial differences primarily existed in out-of-school suspensions, which were also the most widely implemented consequence for office discipline referrals (44% of all female students with a discipline incident), followed by law enforcement referral (5%) and expulsion (0.4%). Of all Black girls who were referred to the office, 52% were suspended from school, a rate that was significantly higher than the district average (of note, these rates are also higher than White and Latino boys in the school district). Conversely, only 20% of Asian girls, 31% of White girls, and 41% of Latinas sent to the office were given out-of-school suspensions. Black and White girls were sent to law enforcement at similar rates after an office referral (5%). However, Black girls were significantly more likely to be expelled (0.9%) than White girls (0%).

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Multivariate analysis. After accounting for a variety of demographic covariates, there were no significant racial group differences (with White girls serving as the reference group) in the referral categories of detrimental behavior and third-degree assault (see Table 4). However, compared with White girls, Black girls were significantly more likely to be referred for disobedience and defiance (RRR = 1.74, $p < .01$), irrespective of their socioeconomic status, ability grouping, school composition, and grade level. This finding is similar to that of Latina (RRR = 1.58, $p < .05$) and multiracial girls (RRR = 2.03, $p < .05$), who were also more likely than White girls to be referred to the office for disobedience or defiance. However, Black girls were significantly less likely than White girls to be referred for drug possession (RRR = 0.39, $p < .001$) or alcohol violations (RRR = 0.17, $p < .05$). Asian girls were much more likely (RRR = 6.58, $p < .05$) than White girls to be sent to the office for an alcohol-related offense. Table 4 also reveals that Black (RRR = 2.25, $p < .001$), Latina (RRR = 1.97, $p < .001$), and multiracial (RRR = 2.13, $p < .001$) girls were significantly more likely than White girls to be suspended from school, even after accounting for other identity markers and the reasons for their office discipline referral.

Qualitative Results

Using the results of the descriptive quantitative findings as grounding, we next moved to CDA. We began with the office referral categories that were statistically significant for Black girls compared with all other female students in the bivariate analysis: detrimental behavior, disobedience and defiance, third-degree assault, drug possession, and alcohol violation (see Table 5).

Using the definitions found in the District handbook (SDI, 2013-2014), we used CDA to sort these into subjective categories (those based on perceptions) and objective categories (those verifiable actions with a permanent product) to determine whether Black girls are more likely to be punished for subjective referrals (Skiba et al., 2002). Our results show that all three of the categories for which Black girls were most likely to be referred were subjective, and conversely, they were less likely to be referred for objective referral reasons.

We used two aspects of CDA: (a) discourses as instruments of power and control and (b) discourses as the instrument of social construction and reality (Wodak, 2002). The power and control is obvious in the purpose of the SDI that is to, "report each district's most serious behavioral incidents and attendance data to CDE." The CDE is the Colorado Department of Education, whose role "provides leadership, resources, support and accountability to the

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Table 5. Statistically Significant Differences in Office Referral Categories Between Black Girls and All Other Female Students in the Bivariate Analysis, Sorted by Etic Codes.

Subjective	Objective
Detrimental (more likely)	Drug possession or distribution (less likely)
Disobedient/defiant (more likely)	Alcohol possession (less likely)
Third-degree assault (more likely)	

state's 178 school districts, 1,818 schools, close to 50,000 teachers and over 2800 administrators" (CDE, 2015). Therefore, all documents from the CDE, and particularly those that require reporting to the agency, radiate a sense of power and control.

The definitions of detrimental and disobedient/defiant behavior, like all the definitions from SDI that we examined, also shape social reality (Wodak, 2002). Yet, the ways social reality is shaped by the SDI may be more difficult to pinpoint at first. Detrimental behavior is defined as, "behaviors on or off school property that are detrimental to the welfare or safety of other students or of school personnel," including behavior that "creates a threat of physical harm . . . such as harassment, hazing and incidents that result in minor injuries" (SDI, 2013-2014, p. 20). However, what is perceived as harmful and threatening is largely based on the judgment of individual school personnel (Skiba et al., 2002). This is similar to the category of disobedient/defiant, defined as, "being willfully disobedient or openly and persistently defiant or repeatedly interfering with the school's ability to provide educational opportunities and a safe environment for other students" (SDI, 2013-2014, p. 20). How does a teacher or hall monitor determine whether a child is being *willfully* or *openly* non-compliant? That decision is based on perception. In this way, the SDI helps construct a social reality. It provides the language the school personnel need to punish once the child has been deemed a problem.

Third-degree assault may seem more objective, defined as when a student, "knowingly or recklessly causes bodily injury to another person or with criminal negligence he causes bodily injury to another person by means of a deadly weapon" (SDI, 2013-2014, p. 19). However, both the phrases "knowingly or recklessly" and "bodily injury" help uncover the subjectivity of this category as well. The requirement that a student "knowingly" causes injury assumes intent; the phrase requires school personnel look at a student who hurt another student and speculate whether a child *wanted* to cause that hurt. Like perceiving threat, perceiving intent is largely based on judgment. "Recklessly" causing injury is similarly subjective. What is the distinction of

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a child being childlike versus reckless? Exploring the definition of bodily injury is likewise based on perception, "A cut, abrasion, bruise, burn, or disfigurement; physical pain; illness; impairment of the function of a bodily member, organ, or mental faculty; or any other injury to the body, no matter how temporary" (Churchill, 2009). When measuring the bodily injury of a child after a disagreement or fight, if one is crying or upset, that is enough to refer a Black girl for third-degree assault. Thus, all the categories in which Black girls were overrepresented were for subjective behaviors that depend on the perceptions of school staff.

Ultimately, the only referral categories in which Black girls were significantly less likely to be referred to the office were for objective reasons: drug or alcohol possession or distribution. Drug and alcohol possession is defined as, "Use, possession, or sale of drugs or controlled substances/alcohol on school grounds, in school vehicles, or at school activities or sanctioned events" (SDI, 2013-2014, p. 20). Both these categories required material evidence to substantiate a referral, thereby making it more difficult for school staff to make judgments of student behavior based on stereotypes.

Thus, our findings indicate that Black girls are being punished largely for perceptions of threat, non-compliance, and harm. These patterns are alarming as these are the referral categories that can be most affected by racial bias, unconscious or not, for they involve students breaching implicit norms among school staff. Teachers' and administrators' behavioral expectations—such as those of students'—are shaped by perception and bound by culture. Quantitative experimental research has shown that Black boys are perceived to be older and less innocent (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & Ditomasso, 2014), and that teachers are more likely to discipline Black boys more harshly for the same behaviors as their White peers (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Qualitative studies suggest Black girls experience gendered and racialized dynamics, as they are perceived to be less ladylike and more aggressive (Morris, 2005). It is, therefore, likely that biases in perceptions of student behavior contribute to differential selection for office referrals, along with disproportionalities in the distribution of referral reasons and exclusionary discipline outcomes. To understand the source of these biases, we now link the microinteractional with the macrosociopolitical (Alim & Reyes, 2011).

Grounded on the premise that "discourse does ideological work" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), we then examined which referral reasons were aligned with some of the dominant narratives about Black women. Our examination revealed that Black girls get referred to the office for reasons that reflect common stereotypes about this population (see Table 6). Behavior deemed disobedient, defiant, and detrimental follows a pattern of racial stereotypes about Black girls who are too loud (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007),

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Table 6. The Alignment Between Referral Categories That Black Girls Were Significantly More Likely to Experience at the Bivariate Level and Dominant Narratives About Black Women.

Dominant narrative about Black women	Referral reasons
Loud	Disobedient/defiant
Bad attitude/mouthy/talk back	Disobedient/defiant
Threatening	Detrimental
Dangerous/less innocent	Third-degree assault

have a bad attitude (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011), or act "ghetto" (Jones, 2009). Moreover, referrals for third-degree assault position Black girls as less innocent, stronger, and more harmful than other girls.

Importantly, these assumptions about Black girls are deeply grounded in historical stereotypes about Black women. Black girls are often considered to have a bad attitude or are too mouthy or loud, like the Black woman Sapphire archetypes, these voices of these Black girls are unwelcome in schools, considered un-ladylike. Like the Welfare Queen trope, Black girls are viewed as being dangerous and threatening, stopping at nothing to get what they want. It is equally important to note that Black girls were not referred for behaviors that may be linked to a matriarchal controlling image, though previous research has been shown that Black girls often do take on a helping role in the classroom (Grant, 1994). This may be because Black girls do not get punished for helping even if they are being positioned as nurturers. DPS did not officially refer students for dress code violations so it was not clear whether Black girls were being viewed as more sexualized than their peers. However, they were not overrepresented in unlawful sexual behavior, a more objective referral category. These dominant narratives about Black women put Black girls under constant surveillance, leaving them more susceptible to criminalization of their behaviors (Martin & Beese, 2015).

Considering that White femininity is often defined by passiveness, quietness, and helplessness in the face of men, Black girls are immediately positioned as less feminine. Our analysis suggests Black girls have limited access to normative femininity including notions of ability and innocence due to the intersecting impacts of racism and sexism (Annamma, 2014).

Discussion

Quantitative data analyses revealed there were significant racial differences in several categories of office referral reasons and exclusionary discipline

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outcomes. In multivariate analyses, findings were statistically significant for Black girls in the categories of disobedient/defiant behavior, drug possession, and out-of-school suspension, even when controlling for other demographic factors. Thus, the quantitative analysis shows that even when Black girls are referred to the office for the same behaviors as others girls, holding for other identity markers, Black girls are punished more harshly. This pattern is reinforced by other research that documented similar patterns for all Black students (Anyon et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2013; Wallace et al., 2008) and Black girls in particular (Blake et al., 2010).

Qualitatively, Black girls were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline outcomes for subjective reasons, such as disobedience/defiance, detrimental behavior, and third-degree assault, which depend on the judgment of school personnel. White girls were more likely to be suspended for objective reasons, such as drug and alcohol possession, which are often considered more serious. These findings align with other studies on racial disparities in discipline (Skiba et al., 2002). However, our conceptual framework and methodology allowed for deeper qualitative examination of subjective categories to better understand why these patterns may occur. van Dijk (1993) notes, "critical discourse analysis may literally reveal processes of racism that otherwise would be difficult to establish, or that would be formally denied by the majority participants" (p. 119). The dominant discourses that frame Black girls as less innocent and feminine than all other girls likely influence these exclusionary discipline outcomes (Morris, 2012).

Counter-narratives, stories marginalized people tell about themselves and their sociocultural context in which they function, about Black girls are necessary (Harper, 2015). That is because these dominant narratives about Black girls ignore the fact that many young women of color have had to learn to be assertive, take initiative, and show fortitude in the face of historical and contemporary racism (Collins, 1991). Young women of color are also creative, innovative, and thoughtful (Brown, 2009; Jones, 2009; Winn, 2011). Social relationships are always undergirded by invisible ideologies about the least powerful (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1993). If teachers and school personnel are unaware of the historical and contemporaneous ways racism manifests in the lives of their Black female students, will they be able to perceive behaviors as positive traits or will they mistake these behaviors for threats and non-compliance (Pane, Rocco, Miller, & Salmon, 2014; Wun, 2014)? As Hall and Smith (2012) note, "regrettably, the 'inherited' attributes of Black girls are often interpreted (against the framework of conventional femininity) as obstinate, aggressive, and disobedient behaviors" (p. 225). This is especially important

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when considering the carceral state, in which the School-to-Prison Pipeline functions. Spillers (1987) notes, the "African-American female's . . . 'strength' come(s) to be interpreted by . . . both black and white, oddly enough-as a 'pathology,'" (p. 74). In this study, we expose the mechanisms for funneling Black girls into the Pipeline using supposedly race-neutral definitions in the name of pathologization and criminalization, making incarceration more likely in their future.

Implications

Findings indicate that Black girls are most often being subjected to discipline based on the judgment of school personnel, many of whom likely have limited understanding of ways race and racism affect Black girls' lives. A direct implication from this study is that all teachers need training on understanding both historical and contemporary racism, equity, and power (Milner & Tenore, 2010). Along with this, teachers need training to understand how racism and White supremacy affect their own biases and stereotypes they hold about Black girls. CRT and FemCrit remind us that because Black girls are a part of an oppressed group in U.S. society, their voices are often silenced (Pratt-Clarke, 2010). Currently, if a Black girl acts in a way that contrasts normative femininity, she is at risk of being thrown out of the classroom and school, increasing the likelihood that she will interact with the criminal legal system. To remedy this, instead of implementing disciplinary exclusion when Black girls act in ways that do not align with White femininity, educators should take the opportunity to learn new ways of being a woman in the world. In fact, it would benefit all who work in schools to see Black girls as powerful and assertive women who can solve their own problems with savvy and ingenuity.

Solving problems with savvy and ingenuity is a disposition that can be traced back to slavery when Black families were separated and Black women had to assume the position of "head of household" to raise their children alone. Naturally, generations of young Black girls "seeing" and enacting various survival practices have come to be a part of the fabric of who they are and have come to be, young women who are empowered to claim their own lives (Collins, 1989). However, our discussion of Black girls' behaviors is not intended to essentialize, or assume "that a unitary, 'essential' . . . experience can be . . . described" (Harris, 1990, p. 585). Black girls possess varied experiences and skills, all of which need to be viewed as strengths. In other words, there are a multitude of ways of being a Black girl, and no one set of behaviors should be expected or demanded from them to be given equal access to educational opportunity.

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Limitations and future research. Whereas the strength of this study lies in its conceptual framing and focus on Black girls, the limitation of this study is the reliance on statistical data from one school district to describe their experiences. Findings from this study are only generalizable to other school districts that have similar discipline policies, serving a comparable population of students in an urban setting. Further investigation of these patterns using a larger sample of schools and districts would substantially further knowledge development. Moreover, our data did not include information about the adult who made an office discipline referral. Some scholars have suggested that adults who do not have consistent opportunities to build relationships and trust with students, such as security guards and administrators, may be "more likely to rely on potentially negative racial stereotypes than individualized knowledge about the specific students" (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2015, p. 10). Such data would provide important information about the types of school staff members whose discipline referrals may be most influenced by dominant discourses about Black girls and should be the target of interventions.

Other limitations to study design that should be taken into account include the reliance on an administrative data set and policy documents that were not triangulated with other sources. We explored the outcomes of disciplinary practices and processes, but need more information on the ways discipline occurs in schools from the views of school personnel and students. Additional qualitative studies are, therefore, needed to continue to shed light on the experiences, counter-narratives, and positioning of Black girls.

Finally, this study was correlational and does not provide *causal* evidence of the dynamics that lead to discipline disparities among Black girls. Misbehavior is not a random phenomenon, so there are likely other factors not captured in our data set that may also explain why Black girls were more or less likely to be referred for different types of discipline incidents. Future research in this area should include measure such as the nature of the schools' discipline philosophy or code of conduct, students' access to culturally responsive instruction, and the availability of prevention or intervention programs. In short, our discussion only provides hypotheses about underlying mechanisms behind this phenomenon, using FemCrit as a guide.

Conclusion

Returning to the attack at Spring Valley High by Officer Ben Fields on a Black girl sitting quietly at her desk, this article illustrates how dominant narratives about Black girls can affect the ways Black girls are disciplined in schools. Seeing a young Black girl obstinately refuse to turn over her cell

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phone may have conjured narratives of Sapphire's un-ladylike bad attitude, and when she continually declined to leave the classroom, the Welfare Queen trope of being dangerous and threatening. These dominant narratives, along with one of carrying the urban ghetto inside of her, may have been the mechanisms that influenced Fields to view a Black girl sitting at her desk as a threat, one that needed to be forcibly assaulted. Each of these dominant narratives makes Black girls more susceptible to disciplinary disparities in urban schools that can leave them with both emotional and physical scars from their education.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline has received increasing attention as the number of students funneled from urban educational to carceral institutions through exclusionary school discipline practices continues to grow at alarming rates (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Conducted through a partnership with DPS, this study represents an effort to improve policy and practice through research in urban schools. Using FemCrit and CRT, we argue that dominant discourses about Black girls inform the reasons why Black girls enter the school discipline system through office referrals and be punished more harshly for the same behavior. This article seeks justice by expanding urban education research to include and center Black girls, a marginalized population that is often left out of conversations around inequities in school discipline and urban education.

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Notes

1. The teenage Black girl does have a name; however, the authors believe in her right to privacy considering that she is a minor and has not come forward with her story.
2. Because Kenny has gone on television with her own account of the incident, the authors feel it is appropriate to name her here.
3. Free and reduced lunch is a common indicator for socioeconomic status.

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