Mental Health of Black Girls

The Case for Gender-Specific and Culturally Affirming Services

National Black Women's Justice Institute

Racism has critical implications for Black adolescent girls' mental health.

- Among Black youth, experiences of racial discrimination are associated with signs of depression. Depression is a risk factor of suicide.[2]

- Between 1991 and 2017, suicide attempts by Black youth increased, while suicide attempts among youth across other race and ethnicities decreased.[3] **Suicide death rates for Black teenage girls increased by 182%** from 2001 to 2017.[4]

- Black girls experience discrimination related to both race and gender, which can impact mental health. **Black girls who are exposed to oppressive messages about Black women have been shown to experience relatively more depressive symptoms** than Black girls who aren't exposed to such messages.[5] Girls who experience gender–based violence such as sexual harassment tend to have an elevated risk of self–harm, suicidal thoughts, and feeling unsafe at school.[6]

Instead of addressing the mental health needs of Black girls, Black girls are punished and criminalized.

- Adults may **view Black girls with depression or mental health issues as "problems" or "troublemakers" and respond with punishment rather than affirmation and treatment**.[8]

- Black girls may not engage in mental health services because of social stigma, apprehension about the efficacy of treatment, distrust of providers, and structural barriers such as unequal access to information and services.[9]

- Practitioners need to use social justice oriented treatment approaches to address the underlying causes and symptoms of mental health issues that are specific to Black girls.[10]

HALF

of mental illness in the U.S. begins in adolescence by the age of 14.[1]

Nearly 1 in 2 youth
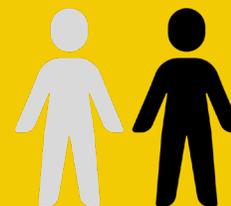
with a mental health disorder do not receive needed treatment or counseling from a mental health professional.[7]

Grace's story[11]

Grace is a 15-year-old Black girl in Michigan who was sent to juvenile detention after she was found in violation of her probation for not doing online homework. Grace has ADHD and receives special education services, and when the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to cease in-person learning, she reportedly struggled with the transition to online learning.

Instead of recognizing Grace's behavior as normal and developmentally appropriate—especially in the midst of a pandemic when the lives of everyone were turned upside down—the judge concluded Grace was a "threat to (the) community." We need to invest in community-led, gender-affirming programs and services for Black girls like Grace that support girls and help them thrive.

The majority of Black girls in the juvenile justice system have histories of trauma and mental health conditions. When unaddressed, these can lead to worse mental health and long-term involvement in the juvenile/criminal legal system.

- Entry into the juvenile justice system can exacerbate youth mental health issues due to inconsistency in treatment, screening and assessment, and access to resources.[12]

- Black girls in juvenile detention are especially vulnerable to depression.[13]

Police Pepper Spray 9-Year-Old Black Girl[19]

Police body-camera footage shows a 9-year-old Black girl repeatedly crying and calling for her father after Rochester police responded to a family disturbance call. At one point during the interaction, an officer said, "You're acting like a child." She responded, "I am a child." She was handcuffed, and when she refused to sit inside a police car, an officer pepper-sprayed her.

This incident, and many others, shows how the convergence of racial bias and gender bias make interactions with police devastating and traumatizing for Black girls. Law enforcement and others continue to view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like. The status quo of law enforcement responses and criminalization of Black girls only causes more trauma and does not heal or increase public safety. We must change how we respond to mental health needs and people in distress.

2 MILLION
youth are arrested each year.[14]

75%
have experienced traumatic victimization.[17]

BLACK GIRLS ARE
OVERREPRESENTED

3x
as likely as their white peers to be incarcerated.[15]

VS.

14% of the U.S. population is Black.[20]

43% of girls in youth detention are Black.[18]

4 of 5 GIRLS
in the juvenile justice system suffer from a mental health disorder.[16]

Mental Health Resources for Black Girls

- **Therapy for Black Girls:** an online space dedicated to the mental wellness of Black women and girls.

- **The Loveland Foundation:** Provides financial support for therapy for Black women & girls.

- **The National Queer & Trans Therapists of Color Network:** Committed to transforming mental health for queer and trans people of color.

- **Podcasts and Apps**
  - Balanced Black Girl Podcast
  - Between Sessions Podcast
  - The Safe Place

Black Girls Smile Inc. provides virtual and in-person programming—including monthly healing circles, intersectionality workshops, and mental health literacy programming—aimed at Black girls and their caregivers to increase mental health literacy, support accessibility, and bolster overall mental health and wellbeing. We provide therapy assistance to alleviate the financial burden of working with licensed mental health professionals. We are also piloting a suicide prevention program.

What do Black girls want from mental health providers?

We constantly hear from Black women and girls as a part of our programming and community that they are looking for culturally- and gender-responsive providers that understand and empathize with the unique risk factors and experiences that impact the mental health and wellbeing of Black women and girls. We also consistently hear requests to increase access to providers of color and additional "spaces" and opportunities for healing and sisterhood as it pertains to mental healing and processing.

How does your programming affirm Black girls gender and cultural identities?

From our Board of all Black women from various backgrounds to our all Black female team, we work on being responsive and inclusive to the gender and cultural experiences of Black women and girls. We additionally work to provide an extensive voice to our participants through listening sessions, healing circles, volunteerism, and our Junior Advisory Board to allow our participants and community to help guide our priorities and initiatives as an organization.

Detroit Heals Detroit fosters healing justice for Detroit youth through which they are able to transform their pain into power. With a goal to combat trauma, we use healing centered engagement to share our greatest vulnerabilities with the rest of the world while simultaneously working to dismantle oppressive systems for marginalized Detroit youth. We teach Black girls that they are not just their trauma but, rather, all of the ways they continue to dream, imagine, hope, and grow. In the spaces we create, we want to see Black girls singing and dancing and being loud and saying their names proudly and all the other commonalities that make Black girls unique—we encourage it and do not police it. We encourage leaning into sisterhood and being vulnerable in spaces that are meant for us to heal. At Detroit Heals Detroit, we let Black girls be Black girls. Simple. Unapologetically.

What do Black girls want from mental health providers?

For their experiences to not be trivialized and for providers to see them beyond their trauma. Black girls are getting punished for simply being and that's a problem. Race-based trauma is real, and they really are not talking about it enough in the mental health space.

How does your programming affirm Black girls gender and cultural identities?

We know that your culture is your medicine, so we create brave spaces that lift up shared experiences and identities that encompass Black girlhood.

Justice for Black Girls is a community grassroots organization focused on expanding knowledge of the ways US-based systems of power respond to and perpetuate the abuse of Black girls in schools, in prison, and in protest. We provide effective, compassionate, and culturally responsive healing for young people. Opening with meditation, community agreements and pledges to Black girl liberation pushes participants to actively disrespect the systems that disrespect Black girls and consider the ways in which we can create spaces rooted in healing & safety.

What do Black girls want from mental health providers?

In a world built on the structural degradation of their personhood, Black girls disproportionately experience abuse and trauma. Black girls often don't have the privilege of experiencing adolescence in ways that allow them to make mistakes and healthily grow through childhood. Black girls deserve mental health providers who understand their unique experiences and who can identify the ways their Black girlhood may require greater resilience, but also greater glory.

How does your programming affirm Black girls gender and cultural identities?

We believe that Black girls are worthy, that they are the experts of their own experience, and that they deserve lives that center their healing and liberation, not just a world that responds to their abuse and trauma. We are committed to creating space that enables Black girls to imagine a life beyond the confining structures in which they currently live.

Endnotes

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