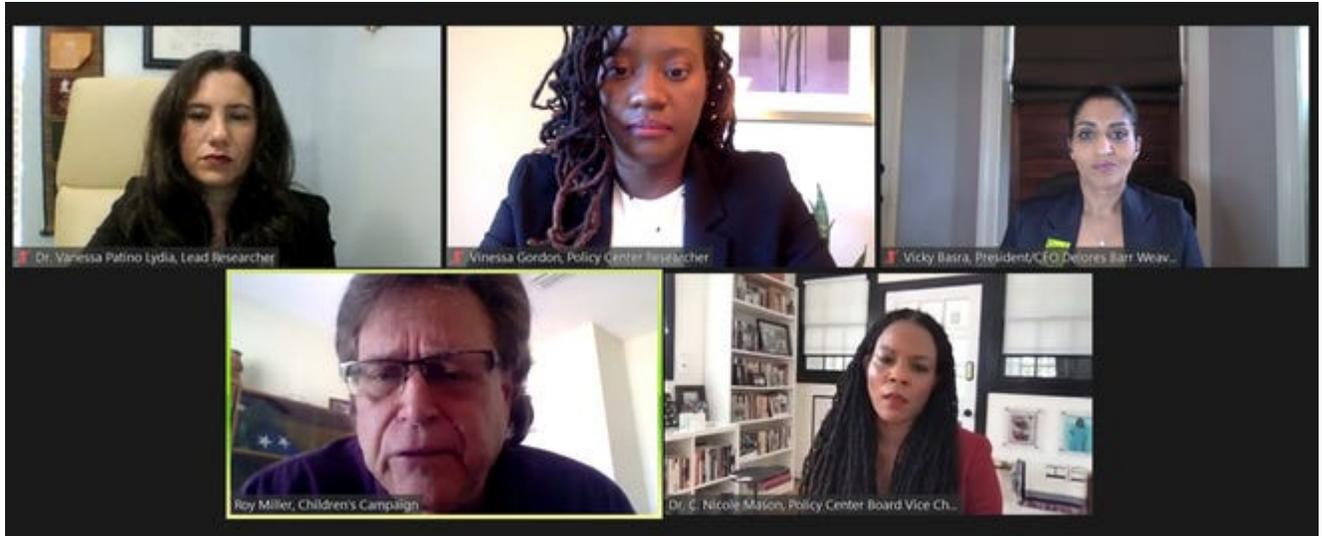


'Sounding the Alarm': Jacksonville research center finds Black girls receive unfair punishment

Beth Reese Cravey

Florida Times-Union

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Black girls are "disproportionately punished" in the education and juvenile justice systems, from school suspension to incarceration, according to a new report from the Jacksonville-based Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center.

Only 21 percent of Florida girls ages 10 to 17 are Black, but in 2019-20 they represented 45 percent of the girls arrested, 47 percent of the girls incarcerated, 52 percent of girls on probation and 52 percent of the girls transferred into the adult criminal justice system. Also, Black girls accounted for 83 percent of the 15 girls under age 10 who were arrested and 55 percent of the 524 girls aged 12 and under who were arrested, according to the report released Thursday.

Black girls also accounted for 49 percent of Florida girls given out-of-school suspensions and 49 percent of the girls who made contact with law

enforcement at school, mostly for fighting and disorderly conduct, according to the report, called "Sounding the Alarm: Criminalization of Black Girls in Florida."

"Black girls do not misbehave more than their white peers, but their behaviors are responded to much more harshly," Vicky Basra, the center's president/CEO, said during a Zoom panel discussion about the report. "We need to make changes so Black girls are treated equitably, see these girls through the lens of their experience and potential. ... Every one of these numbers represents a real life, a real girl, a real family."

Founded in 2012 and funded by Jacksonville philanthropist Weaver, the center was created as a national model in how to help at-risk girls before and after they get in trouble with the law.

"Sounding the Alarm" is its second report issued in 2021. In January its third study on the "Status of Girls" in Florida found "rampant victimization" with girls of color and those from rural areas or who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

The data illuminate ongoing systemic failures'

The new report was released in collaboration with The Children's Campaign, a Tallahassee-based child-advocacy organization, as part of the center's ongoing Justice for Girls Reform Movement. Researchers used data from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, state Department of Education and the state Department of Juvenile Justice, as well as the state Department of Health's Youth Substance Abuse Survey and Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

"It is imperative to consider data by race and ethnicity within gender to better understand differences in girls' experiences," according to the report. "The data illuminate ongoing systemic failures and criminalizing responses that put the overall well-being of Black girls at risk."

In 2019-20 about 3,000 Black girls were arrested in Florida: 1,292 were eligible for an alternative to arrest such as civil citations but 43 percent of those eligible were still arrested. About 850 Black girls were placed on juvenile probation, 19 were transferred to the adult system and 101 were incarcerated, including 14 with a technical probation violation as "their most serious offense," according to the report.

The findings show "adultification bias," with Black girls being perceived as older and more accountable than their ages actually reflect, said Vanessa Patino Lydia, the center's vice president of research and planning and the report's lead researcher.

In addition to disciplinary disparity, the findings revealed "stark geographic imbalances."

More Black girls incarcerated

In fiscal 2019-20, 15 Florida counties, including Duval, had "particularly high overrepresentation" of Black girls arrested and incarcerated, according to the report.

In Duval 43 percent of girls in the population are Black. Sixty-seven percent of the 201 girls arrested and 64 percent of the 11 girls who were incarcerated were Black. But during the Zoom session, Duval authorities were praised for their growing willingness to use civil citations that free girls with low-level issues from entering the justice system and provides them with support.

Of the other 14 counties, Alachua had the highest percentages: 34 percent of its girls are Black, but 82 percent of the 88 girls arrested and 100 percent of the seven girls incarcerated were Black, according to the report.

The other counties cited were Brevard, Broward, Escambia, Highlands, Lee, Manatee, Marion, Orange, Palm Beach, Pinellas, Polk, St. Lucie and Volusia.

The report showed that incidents in schools are the "primary gateway for juvenile justice involvement" involving girls. During school closures stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of contacts between Black girls and law

enforcement decreased: April to June 2020 there were six contacts, compared to 250 during the same period in 2019.

"As children return back to school in larger numbers ... child advocates throughout Florida are deeply concerned that the disproportionate arrests and discipline of Black girls will begin to soar again," said Roy Miller, president of The Children's Campaign.

C. Nicole Mason, vice chairwoman of the center's board and CEO of Washington-based Institute for Women's Policy Research, said 30 years ago she was one of those at-risk Black girls. At the time, "school was one of the few places I could go ... to get away from what was happening at home" and was a place where she received nonjudgmental support, she said.

Since then, the school suspension rate has "more than doubled," and troubled Black girls are more likely to be disciplined at school than supported, she said.

"It's heartbreaking. This is not normal," Mason said. "There is a lot of work we must do to reverse some of these damaging trends. If we don't ... we're going to lose a generation of girls."

"This is not rocket science," she said. "We know what to do."

Ways to fix the problem

The report made the following recommendations:

- Ban suspension of prekindergarten- through third-grade students and limit arrests for youth under the age of 12, with exceptions based on the severity of the offense.
- Specify the different roles of schools, school resource officers and law enforcement.
- Examine trends of educational disparity, discipline, juvenile justice and school suspension data for Black girls.

- Begin focus groups to engage girls in the community.
- Fund increased "girl-centered, trauma-informed and culturally responsive" school-based mental health services.
- Use juvenile civil citations as alternatives to arrest in schools and in the community.
- Fund therapeutic alternatives to families in crisis outside of the juvenile justice system.
- Identify how other states are "deliberately responding to systemic disparities that Black girls face in the justice system" and implement their best practices.

Educational and juvenile justice system reforms are "long overdue," said Patino Lydia.

"The disproportionate trends among Black girls entering the system at young ages equip community leaders to ... change the trajectory of Black girls and their families," she said.

Beth Reese Cravey: bcravey@jacksonville.com

DELORES BARR WEAVER POLICY CENTER

To read the full report, go to seethegirl.org/sounding-the-alarm.

Black Girls Arrested and Incarcerated by County, FY 2019-20

		Arrest		Incarcerated	
County	% of Black girls in General Population	# of Girls arrested	% Black	# of Girls Incarcerated	% Black
Alachua	34%	88	82%	7	100%
Brevard	15%	273	36%	5	20%
Broward	39%	371	57%	8	87%
Duval	43%	201	67%	11	64%
Escambia	35%	328	72%	19	63%
Highlands	17%	50	44%	6	33%
Lee	14%	191	29%	10	20%
Manatee	14%	177	34%	7	71%
Marion	20%	183	40%	7	29%
Orange	25%	536	56%	9	67%
Palm Beach	28%	330	55%	8	50%
Pinellas	19%	287	55%	7	86%
Polk	20%	394	46%	16	38%
St. Lucie	31%	148	59%	7	43%
Volusia	16%	252	42%	12	50%

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