

'Zero tolerance' policies disproportionately punish black girls, professor says

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When schools put zero tolerance policies into effect, such rules were intended to address problems such as violence, weapons, drugs or other illegal activities. Consequently, "zero tolerance" policies have been used to punish behavioral issues, including inappropriate dress and other minor transgressions. And like many disciplinary measures, they have disproportionately affected black students. A University of Kansas researcher has co-authored a study calling for more research on zero tolerance policies and for policy makers and educators to consider the implications for such policies on students of color, especially black girls.

Dorothy Hines-Datiri, assistant professor of multicultural education, co-authored the study with Dorinda Carter Andrews of Michigan State University and argues that zero tolerance policies are not colorblind. Much research has been devoted to how discipline policies disproportionately affect black males, but little attention has been paid to how they affect black girls. Hines-Datiri has presented the study at the American Educational Research Association's national convention and it is forthcoming in the *Urban Education* journal. Black girls who are punished more harshly than their white peers face a host of educational consequences that extend throughout school because they are disciplined more often and viewed by their peers and educators as more likely to be disciplined.

"What we see in data from the U.S. Department of Education is that zero tolerance policies are disproportionately affecting students of color and especially black girls," Hines-Datiri said. "How I see myself as a student

has a lot to do not only with how I see myself in general, but how others see me, and it is rooted in where I am, including in schools."

The aforementioned data shows that in 2010, black girls in middle school were suspended four times more than their white female counterparts, and in the 2011-2012 year, black girls were suspended six times as often as white girls.

Hines-Datiri suggests that more qualitative research should be conducted to include black girls' narratives, address intersectionality and explore implicit racial bias of teachers and school staff. More empirical studies should be conducted specifically in the areas of critical race feminism and figured worlds, she wrote. The former explores the intersectionality of race and gender and how it influences daily experiences, while the latter examines cultural contexts and sites where identities are produced in school. Individuals "figure" who they are in relation to their social location and develop relationships within a context that is racialized and gendered by teachers and schools. Thus, black girls' experience in schools are largely shaped by zero tolerance policies that not only hold them to ideals of white, heteronormative femininity but punish them for being their authentic selves and suggests that identities other than their own are more valued.

Zero tolerance policies produce a wide array of negative outcomes, including reduced educational achievement, academic disengagement, higher suspension and dropout rates, lower wages earned in postschool careers and more students placed in the school-to-prison pipeline.

"In essence, we urge educational researchers—and K-12 educators and [policy makers](#)—to consider how disciplinary policies create certain kinds of interactions between adults and female students in learning spaces, and how those interactions around disciplinary offenses create certain role expectations in the classroom, 'adultifies' black female

students and solicits certain types of behaviors from them," the researchers wrote.

Zero tolerance policies criminalize and police the types of mannerisms, language, posture and communicative styles of black girls while reinforcing their marginalization in the classroom, Hines-Datiri argues.

Policy makers can help address this issue by rethinking discipline, zero tolerance policies and realizing they are not colorblind. Humanizing black girls in school and viewing their multiple consciousness instead of essentializing them can help to reduce disparities in suspensions, expulsions and punishments given to [black girls](#) for perceived disrespect or insubordination.

"Our hope is that school officials and policy makers can rethink not only who these policies hurt, but also who they protect," Hines-Datiri said.

Hines-Datiri, whose research examines school discipline, race and multicultural education, recently received the Paula Silver Case Award for the most outstanding publication in the *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* from the University Council for Educational Administration. The award was for a publication examining how race and culture influence school discipline when police are involved in schools.

The hope is that additional research will help schools better understand how zero tolerance policies marginalize young black women and how society and schools influence how kids learn in the classroom, and addressing their overcriminalization.

"It will hopefully bring up some good dialogue, but also results," Hines-Datiri said of the research. "We need to make sure as school personnel that kids have a place to be themselves, and also consider the

consequences of the words we speak and how they will affect people who have traditionally been marginalized. We need to look at these issues how they are, not how we perceive them to be. It's about having justice in schools and having equitable schools."

Provided by University of Kansas

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