black women
for black girls
giving circle

BLACK GIRLS
in
NEW YORK CITY:
Untold Strength & Resilience

Commissioned by
**The Black Women for
Black Girls Giving Circle**
of the
Twenty-First Century Foundation

INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S
POLICY RESEARCH

Institute for Women's Policy Research

About This Report

Black Girls in New York City: Untold Strength and Resilience provides an often unseen portrait of the lives of Black girls living in the city of New York. The report offers an overview of literature as well as an analysis of original data collected through focus groups and written surveys. The findings uncover some of the specific challenges and daily struggles faced by girls of African descent, while also identifying their strengths, triumphs, and modes of survival. Ultimately, the report lays out a plan for how those issues, particular to the experiences of Black girls, can best be addressed through the concerted efforts of family, community, and policymakers, and through the self-determining work of these girls themselves.

About the Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle of the Twenty-First Century Foundation

This report was commissioned by the Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle (BWBG), a philanthropic collective that seeks to amass knowledge and financial resources in support of organizations committed to the empowerment of Black girls in New York City. The impetus for this initiative developed as four colleagues—African American women whose work in the non-profit sector afforded them the opportunity to work with and around Black girls—witnessed the myriad challenges these girls seem to face on a regular basis. Concerned about what they were seeing, and the dearth of available research about the state of Black girls in New York City, they reached out to others in the formation of a giving circle to generate the funds necessary to support their vision. Since its inception in the fall of 2004, BWBG has held informational gatherings led by direct service practitioners. The giving circle has a constituency of seventeen committed participants. BWBG is a giving circle of the Twenty-First Century Foundation (21CF), a public foundation whose mission is to facilitate strategic giving for Black community change.

About the Institute for Women's Policy Research

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family, health and safety, and women's civic and political participation.

For more than ten years, IWPR has tracked the well-being of women and girls across the nation. Our work in this area has sought to benchmark progress, highlight remaining barriers to women's equality, and underscore the ways in which the intersection of race and gender impact women of color.

Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle

Chandra Anderson

Kwayera Archer Cunningham

Barbara J. Armstrong

Pauline Barfield

Barbara Bragg

Martha Cameron

Kanyere Eaton*

Joi Gordon

Bernice Giscombe

Desiree Hardaway

G. Angela Henry

Angela Hollis*

Erica Hunt

Debi B. Jackson

Emma Jordan Simpson

Leah Y. Lamb

Violet Mitchell

Valerie Oliver Durrah*

Stephanie Palmer*

Arva Rice

Alexandra Rojas

Linda Tarry-Chard

Karen Taylor Bass

Elwanda Young

*BWBG Founders

Acknowledgements

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Researched and Written by
Avis A. Jones-DeWeever, Ph.D.
Institute for Women's Policy Research

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Preface from the Institute for Women's Policy Research

The Institute for Women's Policy Research was delighted when the Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle asked for support in documenting the circumstances and stories of Black girls in New York City. The partnership between IWPR and the Giving Circle allowed us to begin to address the dearth of information on Black girls in the U.S. together by focusing on one important region with great potential to enact change. All who contributed to this project hope that it will inform new efforts to meet the needs of Black girls, whose stories, in their depth and complexity, remain largely untold.

Through the study we sought answers to a number of questions not often asked. What are the key issues that Black girls face with regard to their physical and emotional well-being, safety and security, and relationships with self, family and potential romantic partners? Where are their safe spaces and what are their sources of support? What are their greatest challenges? And how can we, as individuals, institutions, communities, and the nation as a whole, best support and guide them as they navigate a society that puts them on the outside of both race and gender privilege?

As you will read, Black girls in New York City have lives that are too often riddled with hardship and sometimes danger. In the face of it all, however, these girls show incredible strength, resilience, and optimism. It is our sincere hope that this report creates an opportunity for dialogue about how to improve the lives of Black girls, and that more importantly, it serves as a call to action for families, community and religious leaders, service providers, advocates, and policymakers, to build support systems and open opportunities that will allow Black girls not to just survive, but to thrive.

Sincerely,

Barbara Gault, Ph.D.
Vice President and Director of Research
Institute for Women's Policy Research

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Executive Summary

In 1947, Ralph Ellison eloquently described the plight of living life as an invisible man in America. Today, more than 60 years later, in many respects, it is the Black girl who wears the cloak of invisibility. Even though we see her everywhere—as the video vixen at the periphery of hip hop culture, or the loud, neck-rolling mean girl in public spaces, do we know her? Do we really know her? Are we aware of her special concerns, her distinct challenges, and the intricacies of her unique experience as she attempts to traverse a society that commonly marginalizes her worth, ignores her struggles, and consistently fails to address her distinct concerns through social or policy action? For far too many of us, the answer is no. This report, commissioned by the Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle of The Twenty-First Century Foundation, the Sister Fund, and the New York City Mission Society begins the long overdue process of seeking to answer these questions. It does so through providing an in-depth examination into the lives of Black girls, with a special emphasis on those living within the city of New York. The report provides an overview of existing literature as well as an analysis of original data collected through focus groups and written surveys. Together, these approaches allow us the opportunity to assess the broader landscape traversed by Black girls, while also making clear, their first-hand perspectives—in their own voices—as they share their perspectives regarding navigating a culture that simultaneously places them on the outside of both race and gender privilege as it relates to the American experience.

Included below are highlights of the study's key findings, as well as a set of recommendations that attempt to spell out what can be done to truly address, in an impactful way, the lives and life chances of black girls in New York and beyond.

Poverty One of the Biggest Challenges Faced by Black Girls

The impact of poverty is especially acute in the lives of Black girls. Like all Black children, Black girls are at increased risk of living a life of poverty. But poverty, particularly within urban settings, plays out in the lives of Black girls in very distinct ways. It puts them at increased risk of violence, limits educational opportunities, and for far too many, truncates their childhood experience. Forced to grow up fast, many of the

girls included in this study took on a mountain of adult-like responsibilities, including contributing to the household financially while simultaneously filling the role of second-mother to younger siblings in order to assist over-worked and underpaid parents who themselves are struggling to make ends meet. Approximately three-quarters of the girls in this study live in low-income communities and households.

Black Girls Face Unique Hurdles in Educational Settings

At the elementary and secondary level, Black girls face special challenges in the classroom that may limit their ability to make the most of their educational experience. Some research suggests that teachers tend to focus less on the academic performance of Black girls than on their social decorum in an effort to promote what's thought of as more "ladylike" behavior. Their classroom engagement is, as a result, overtly thwarted, thus providing the potential for negative academic repercussions. Over time, this and other negative actions related to the schooling environment stunts the long-term aspirations of Black girls.

Safety, Prime Concern of Black Girls

Most survey respondents (60 percent) indicated that they worry about their personal safety. Among those who feel unsafe at home, most attribute their uneasiness to drug activity in their community (68 percent) as well as the prevalence of violent crime (64 percent) fights (61 percent) and gang activity (55 percent). But far and away, Black girls most often indicated that they felt unsafe due to frequent fights at school (89 percent).

Black Girls Have a Distinct Perspective on Issues of Self Esteem

Perceptions of femininity within the American context have historically been based on ideals that are directly counter to those physical and behavioral qualities typically associated with Black girls. Yet, the Black girls in this study seemed largely satisfied with themselves. Roughly 9 in 10 indicated that they loved themselves (91 percent), loved being a girl (92 percent), and loved being Black (90 percent). Yet, one-fifth (21 percent) also indicated, that if given the opportunity, they would change their bodies in some way. A few expressed keen sensitivity to issues of skin tone (9 percent). Some were teased harshly for being "too Black." Others even expressed a desire for skin bleaching; and in at least one instance, that ultimate desire was not just to become lighter, but instead, to become white.

Faith, Family, and Racial Identity as Protective Factors in the Lives of Black Girls
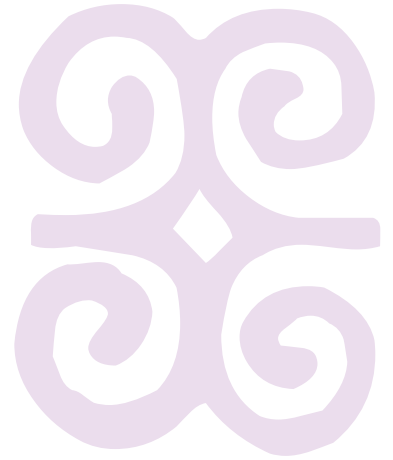
Girls who highly valued spirituality, had an excellent relationship with their primary caretaker, or possessed a strong sense of racial identity tended to do better on a variety of indicators than there counterparts who did not share these attributes. Such girls were more likely to be happy on a typical day, to receive better grades, to want a college education and believe in their ability to reach their goals, and when involved in intimate relationships, they were more likely to engage in self-protective behavior by insisting upon condom usage.

In order to address the particular needs of Black girls, this report puts forth the following set of policy recommendations:

• **IMPLEMENT A SERIES OF DEBRIEFING SESSIONS WITH KEY COMMUNITY LEADERS.** The sessions should be held with policy makers, faith leaders, service providers, women's and girl's organization leaders, educators, and with age-specific groupings of Black girls themselves, to bring to light some of the particular challenges faced by Black girls and to develop strategies for addressing those challenges in varied environments.

• **PARENTS, PRINCIPALS, AND TEACHERS NEED TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF BLACK GIRLS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS.** Of particular concern are issues of safety, social supports, classroom engagement, and time management—all issues that pose real challenges in the lives of Black girls. In addition, high school career and guidance counselors should actively engage underprivileged Black girls about their full range of educational and career opportunities, providing them with information about nontraditional jobs, financial aid and scholarship programs, and mentorship opportunities with successful Black women professionals.

• **SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY GROUPS, AND SERVICE PROVIDERS SERVING BLACK GIRLS SHOULD INCORPORATE INFORMATION AND DISCUSSIONS ABOUT VIOLENCE, SAFETY, AND SEXUAL HEALTH INTO THEIR PROGRAMS AND CURRICULUM.** Black girls and boys should learn at an early age about how physical and sexual violence against girls and women harms entire communities and how they can protect themselves from violence and abuse. Community groups also should come together to devise ways to protect Black girls and boys and their ability to experience a safe childhood on a daily basis.

• **REACH OUT TO ADOLESCENT BLACK GIRLS ABOUT THEIR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH.** Schools, community leaders, and service providers must do more to ensure that Black girls are able to access health services. Many of the girls in this study, including many who are sexually active, have never seen a gynecologist. Screenings for STDs, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases, are critical to ensuring their health and well-being.

• **DEVELOP AFFINITY GROUPS FOR BLACK GIRLS TO PROMOTE A STRONG SENSE OF RACIAL IDENTITY THROUGHOUT THEIR DEVELOPMENTAL YEARS.** Community organizations providing rites of passage programs can provide the model for introducing girls to historical and cultural information and traditions that can help them develop a healthy sense of self even within a world that often projects unhealthy images and associations with Black womanhood. These programs should be expanded and replicated in as many communities as possible, either through community organizations, churches, or schools.

• **PUSH FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMMING AROUND SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTHY PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS.** This study identifies strong relationships between girls and their primary caregivers as a critical source of support and resilience for Black girls. Support should be widely available for parents, grandparents, step-parents, or other caregivers as well as for girls who are themselves interested in improving this critically important relationship.

• **DEVELOP AND EXPAND ONE-ON-ONE MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS.** In addition to healthy parent-child relationships, Black girls would benefit from relationships with Black women leaders in community activism, business (corporations and self-employment), politics, and other careers. One-on-one mentoring programs can provide Black girls with other positive examples of the various life paths and opportunities available to them.

• **CREATE FAITH-BASED AND BLACK GIRL ORGANIZATIONAL ALLIANCES.** This study also underlines the importance of spirituality in the lives of Black girls. Alliances should be built between faith-based organizations and Black-girl focused organizations to coordinate and develop joint initiatives for reaching out to girls in need of community support.

• **EMPHASIZE THE NEED FOR GREATER POLICY ACTION FOCUSING ON POVERTY REDUCTION.** By expanding access to adult education, up to and including access to higher education for welfare recipients, impoverished parents (especially single parents) might have a pathway to true self-sufficiency through gaining the necessary credentials and professional abilities to once and for-all leave poverty behind.

• OPEN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR YOUNG BLACK WOMEN. Black girls and women work hard: Black women's labor force participation rates eclipse those of women from any other racial or ethnic group. Policymakers and philanthropists should reward this hard work with expanded grant and scholarship programs for young Black women seeking to build their skills and knowledge for better employment opportunities. For those who have become mothers at a young age, assistance with housing, child care, and transportation is of paramount importance in allowing them to enroll in and complete post-secondary education.

• PUSH FOR GREATER WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY, ACCESS TO SICK LEAVE, AND OTHER FORMS OF PAID LEAVE SO THAT FAMILIES WILL HAVE THE ABILITY TO SPEND TIME WITH THEIR CHILDREN WHEN THEY NEED THEM THE MOST. Many of the pressures that Black girls face come about as a result of their growing up in households struggling on the economic fringe that are maintained by over-worked parents who typically put in long hours in very inflexible work environments. The trickle-down effect of this lifestyle ultimately puts increased pressure on girls who then have to take on the adult-like role of being the consistent caregiver to younger siblings as part of their after-school and/or after-work "second shift."

Clearly, the lives of Black girls are exceedingly complex. Yet, their needs are typically ignored due to what is often seen as the more pressing concerns of others. This report breaks that cycle and hopes to spawn a joint push among parents, policymakers, concerned community members and others, to meet our girls where they are, and then do what needs to be done in order to ensure that the possibilities found in their to-morrows match the potential found deep within their talents and capabilities of today.

Introduction

…she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself.

—Toni Morrison

The beauty of childhood is the process of self-invention…the process of becoming. It is the miracle of each new life boldly embracing the unknown, asserting its will to survive no matter the circumstance, and then taking what life provides along with the gift of individual distinction in order to craft that one personality that ultimately becomes known as you. And while each new life is unique, precious, and divine from the very beginning, Black girls alone assert a distinctive trait as unparalleled survivors. Medical researchers have found that among the tiniest of premature infants, Black baby girls are far and away the most likely to survive. Among babies weighing only two pounds—roughly the same weight as a quart of milk—Black baby girls are fully twice as likely to live as White baby boys (Morse et al. 2006). Perhaps from the beginning, Black girls are fighters; determined to make a way in a world that will on many accounts, attempt to push them to the periphery. Maybe in preparation for the struggle to come, the seemingly innate strength of Black girls is born and then serves as a source of sustenance as they traverse the path through childhood and adolescence on their way towards becoming the next generation of Black women.

This work, commissioned by the Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle of the Twenty-First Century Foundation, the Sister Fund, and the New York City Mission Society, provides an in-depth examination into the prevailing issues impacting the lives of Black girls, with a special emphasis on those living within the city of New York. In so doing, it provides a much-needed nuanced analysis of lives often overlooked as worthy of in-depth examination in their own right. While much has been written about the perils and pitfalls in the lives of Black boys, as well as the particular challenges traversed by girls—though largely framed in a race-neutral perspective which aligns most closely with experiences and expectations assigned to white girls—few works have even attempted to provide a broad, overarching analysis of Black girls' unique needs and experiences. Such an analysis is far overdue as Black girls face the unique challenge of navigating a world that often perceives them as the direct antithesis to what is often culturally perceived as the "ideal" in terms of both race and gender. As the eternal outsider on

both accounts, their specific needs and concerns are routinely marginalized, or perceived as tangential to what is often viewed as more pressing or central to the needs of others.

This study is different. By placing Black girls at the center of its analysis, it explores their unique circumstances, highlights their experiences, and examines the impact of their environment on their life and life-chances. It uncovers the specific challenges and daily struggles Black girls face, while also identifying their strengths, triumphs, and modes of survival. It asks: What are the key issues that Black girls face with regards to their physical and emotional well-being, safety and security, and relationships with self, family and potential romantic partners? Where are their safe spaces? What are their greatest challenges? And how can we, as individuals, institutions, and communities best support and guide them as they learn to navigate a society that puts them on the outside of both race and gender privilege? These are the questions that this study addresses through a combination of research synthesis and original data collection techniques. Ultimately, we lay out a plan for how those issues particular to the experiences of Black girls can best be addressed through the concerted efforts of family, community, policy action, and through the work and support of the girls themselves. Only through this communal approach, can those issues distinct to the experiences of Black girls be adequately, holistically, and effectively addressed.

I. Examining the Literature on Black Girls

Black girls face a myriad of challenges throughout their developmental experience. Those challenges range from an overwhelming prevalence of socioeconomic disadvantage, to a heightened exposure to violence, mental stressors, and often overlooked, yet persistent and distinct educational challenges. In the face of these and other concerns, Black girls manage to exhibit a boldness that in many ways sees them through, but few obstacles prove more formidable than those associated with economic struggle.

Social Economic Status and its Impacts on Black Girls

Research suggests that the socioeconomic status of families is both directly and indirectly associated to a number of issues that impact the healthy development of children. To the extent that poverty is associated with a wide array of potentially negative outcomes across the developmental spectrum, Black girls and boys, are particularly vulnerable to its ill-effects. Far and away, the poverty rate of Black children exceeds that of all others. The level of poverty among Black children is nearly triple that of Asian American children and white (non-Hispanic) children (33.4 percent versus 12.2 and 10.0 percent, respectively), and is much higher than that of Hispanic children (33.4 percent versus 26.9 percent; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2007b). Although Black children's poverty took an unprecedented dip in the mid- to late-1990's, since then, their fate has taken an unprecedented reversal of fortune. Following the economic downturn of 2000, it has been Black children who have suffered the most. It has been their families who have born the brunt of displacement both from the workforce and from what's left of America's tattered social safety net. As a result, it is Black children, who have been most likely to fall through the cracks and suffer the unfortunate consequences that come as a result of living in the midst of economic vulnerability (Lyter et al. 2004).

The dual impact of both workforce vulnerability and the harsh realities of welfare reform have worked in tandem to make hard times even harder for the most vulnerable. As a result, in recent years Black children have taken an unparalleled step backwards, losing ground relative to white children at an even faster rate than had been historically the case in past economic recessions (Nichols 2006; Lyter et al. 2004). Given

the particular economic vulnerability of Black families, the resulting impact on Black children and Black girls in particular has been, and continues to be, enormous.

Previous studies that have examined the overall status and well-being of Black families have concluded that financial disadvantage, uncertain economic conditions, and low prospects for achievement negatively impact the ability of Black girls to make a healthy transition to adulthood (Hogan and Kitagawa 1985; Murray 1994). Particularly among Black girls residing in an urban context, structural factors such as poverty, social immobility, increased likelihood of victimization, limited access to resources, and both real and perceived lack of opportunities regarding education, employment, and the possibility for forming loving, long-term romantic relationships that result in marriage, all work together to become critical factors impacting Black girls' development during the adolescent years (Lawson, Rodgers-Rose, and Rajaram 1999; Murray 1994; Stevens 2002).

Living under fragile economic conditions, Black girls are forced to grow up fast. They tend to accept employment and handle adult-like responsibilities—such as caring for younger siblings—from an early age. Thus their conception of femininity is one that includes both hard work and perseverance; self-reliance and tenacity; care-giving work and wage-earning work; along with egalitarian notions of sexual equality. As a result, Black girls tend to be assertive, confident, independent, and strong—traits that traditionally hold a close association with masculinity (Buckley and Carter 2005). While such a label may prove problematic within the broader culture, certain egalitarian notions of gender roles within the African American home have historically been more often the norm rather than the exception. The functioning of Black females in a role similar to that of their Black male counterparts has been a key component to the economic survival of the Black family (Collins 2000). Thus, the assumption of adult responsibilities at an early age among Black girls is said to occur due to their realization of the multiple roles expected of them as they transition to adulthood (Smith 1982).

Some research has examined the impact of employment on the lives of Black adolescent girls, but has found conflicting results. While some studies have found employment to be positively related to early sexual onset (Murray 1994), others suggest that a strong school-job orientation results in the delaying of non-marital sexual behavior and childbearing, and conveys certain psychological benefits, such as enhancing feelings of competence and independence, while protecting against feelings of psychological distress (East 1998; Rickert, Wiemann, and Bernson 2000).
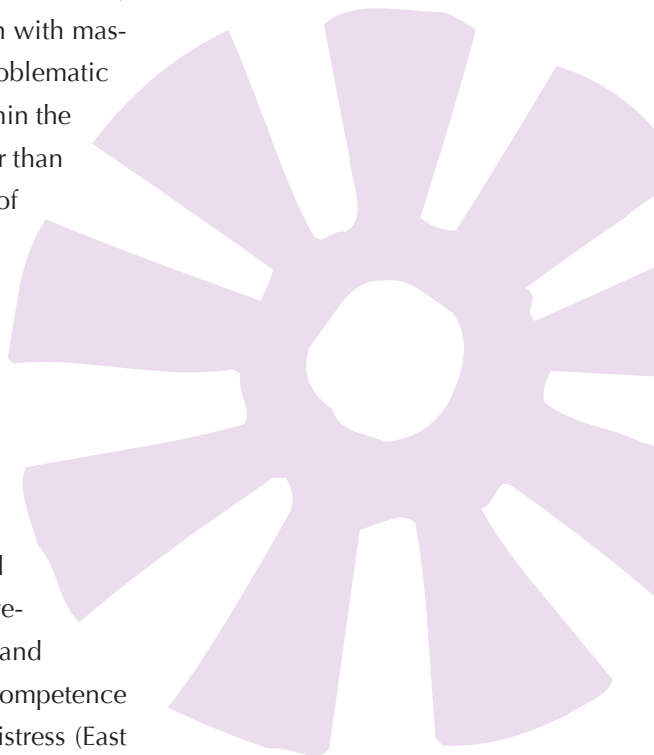
All would agree though, that the lives of Black girls, particularly those whom live on the economic fringe, are lives heavy under the weight of challenge and responsibility, a daily existence that can ultimately deeply impact the hearts and minds of those traversing their way to adulthood.

Negotiating Stress in the Lives of Black Girls

Across the economic divide, Black girls negotiate a variety of potentially stressful life events that ultimately require them to function in a number of roles: that of academic achiever, caretaker, and significant contributor to the household—financially or otherwise. Along with these stressors, Black girls must negotiate a daily existence under the challenge of both race and gender social disadvantage. Some scholars suggest that the resulting stressors that come as a result of experiences with sexism and racism eventually accumulate in the lives of Black girls, causing psychological distress that over time result in an increased vulnerability to mental health problems (Doswell et al. 1998). Such "chronic stressors" are said to lead to greater rates of depression, stress, and hypertension among Black women (Doswell et al. 1998). Ultimately, it is thought that the potential for conflict between white cultural values, Black cultural values, the risk of cultural alienation, the prevalence of negative stereotypes, and the lack of culture-focused guidance, together, create an at-risk environment for the development of poor self-image among Black girls (Doswell et al. 1998).

Not all researchers, though, assert the potential for a heightened level of distress among Black girls. Prelow and Guarnaccia (1997), for example, report that Black and Hispanic adolescents actually experience fewer stressful life events than their white counterparts. Their findings, though, have been said to discount the different ways in which Black girls cope with stressors in their daily lives. Some assert that the historical disadvantaged position of Black women in the United States has necessitated the development of resilient capabilities in order to ensure community survival (Stevens 2001). Others suggest that Black adolescents simply tap into a wider array of support systems than do their white counterparts, such as deep family bonds, strong neighborhood ties, and greater religious involvement (Prelow and Guarnaccia 1997). Comparatively, white adolescents are said to have greater access to only one coping mechanism, the support they receive from their circle of friends (Prelow and Guarnaccia 1997; Stevens 2001).

Black girls, especially, are said to have historically relied on strong networks of family ties which have helped to facilitate their survival, health, and well-being through the reciprocal sharing of resources, chores, child care, information, and emotional support. These strong family bonds are believed to be the resource that ultimately makes the difference, particularly in times of crisis. Researchers suggest that high quality family functioning serve as a coping mechanism in the lives of Black girls, ul-

timately, reducing the effect of stress in their daily lives (Taylor et al. 1990). As a result, Black girls are said to have more coping resources at their disposal and are said to receive a higher level of social support than white adolescents (Prelow and Guarnaccia 1997). Family members and extended kin are said to be the major source of close relationships and overall support for Black females (Taylor et al. 1990). For Black adolescent girls, specifically, issues of social acceptance, close friendship, intellectual ability, morality, romantic relationship, humor, and global self-worth, are all said to be significantly associated to attachment to family and peers (Taylor et al. 1990). Family closeness and having strong family ties are also found to be critical to the reduction of depressive symptoms (Evans 1998). The role of family then, is key, to the overall healthy development of Black girls, particularly since the world beyond its protective embrace may in many ways, reject her very being.

Black Girls and Issues of Self-Esteem

Perceptions of femininity within the American context have historically been based on ideals that are directly counter to those physical and behavioral qualities typically associated with Black girls. Feminine beauty, for example, has typically been based on white, heterosexual ideologies that place greater value on qualities such as pale skin, a slender physique, blue eyes, and blonde hair that is straight and thin in texture. Thus, it is the image of white femininity that is said to be the cultural universal for womanhood. Yet, literature on the self-conceptions of Black girls has yielded conflicting findings. While some have asserted that Black girls are generally more likely to think of themselves as good-looking, be satisfied with their appearance, and exhibit higher levels of self confidence than their white counterparts (Bankston and Zhou 2002; Milkie 1999; Schoen, Davis, and Collins 1997), others have found that issues of hair texture and skin tone persist, along with very specific issues at it relates to body image. Although Black girls may not typically aspire to the ultra-thin ideal often idealized by girls who are white, heavier Black girls who compare themselves to slimmer Black girls tend to be less satisfied with their bodies and their physical appearance than their slimmer counterparts (Harris 1995; Milkie 1999).

Poverty too is said to negatively impact the self-esteem of Black girls and their likelihood of exhibiting depressive symptoms. Some have even suggested that Black girls who live within low-income families consider themselves to be less likeable and lovable than their peers and exhibit a greater number of reported depressive symptoms than similarly situated Black boys (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Mandara, Murray, and Joyner 2005). Other research, however, points to the quality

of family functioning as the most significant predictor of their self-esteem and overall psychosocial development (Mandara, Murray, and Joyner 2005).

Another body of work has found that while the popular media continues to perpetuate the white feminine ideal, Black girls tend to be more adept at rejecting beauty ideals that don't conform to their cultural norm, as they see such representations as "biased" or largely irrelevant to their sense of self (Duke 2000; Duke 2002; Pugh-Lilly, Neville, and Poulin 2001). Further, Black girls tend to be disinterested in even pursuing popular conceptions of the ideal feminine physique. Instead, they tend to place more credence on evaluating each other and themselves on issues of character and personality, rather than physical appearance (Duke 2000; Duke 2002). When pressed about their conception of a beauty ideal, they articulated a broader sense of what is thought of as beautiful, one inclusive of a wider range of physical appearances and body shapes. Black girls also tended to articulate their conceptions of beauty in comparison to others within their own social group instead of those conceptions popularized by the broader culture. In fact, they frequently referred to their mothers, grandmothers, and other members within their own families as the barometer by which beauty is measured (Duke 2000; Duke 2002; Milkie 1999).

The Importance of Racial Identity and Religion in the Lives of Black Girls

Attitudes regarding racial identity were found to play a key role in the self-esteem, socialization, and overall mental health of Black girls. According to the work of Buckley and Carter (2005), Black girls who can both respond objectively to Eurocentric values, while also feeling good about their own racial identity, are more likely to ultimately, feel good about themselves. In fact, the more Black girls were found to endorse pro-Black attitudes, the fewer distressing psychological and physical symptoms they reported, and the more likely they were to exhibit high levels of self-esteem and self acceptance (Buckley and Carter 2005; Constantine et al. 2006; Constantine and Blackmon 2002). Overall, the more Black girls possess a value system that serves as a positive reflection of their culture, the more likely they are to feel satisfied with their lives. Likewise, to the extent that they are successful in internalizing a positive conception of their racial identity and embracing egalitarian gender role attitudes as part of the process of self-understanding, the more likely Black girls are to hold favorable views of their physical appearance, fitness, academic achievement, career aspirations, and attach an importance to health (Harris 1995).

Religion, too, is found to play an especially crucial role in the overall well-being of Black girls. Generally speaking, Black adolescents tend to report higher levels of religious commitment than their white counterparts (Wallace et al. 2003), and Black

girls, specifically, are found to be more likely than Black males to be more intimately involved in their religious communities (Brown and Gilligan 1992). Research suggests that religion serves as a source of social support and positive self-regard among

Black women and girls. Further, being strongly connected to a religious community ultimately results in a deeper level of integration within the Black community and its corresponding social networks. This connection, then, provides an extra layer of protection against negative social stigma from the broader culture, while also providing access to alternative models against which one might evaluate images propagated through the media. As a result, participation in church communities is said to be positively associated with higher self-esteem, and negatively associated with distress. Further, religious participation seemingly serves as a buffer against negative influences regarding physical unattractiveness. Instead, religious norms tend to encourage the evaluations of others based on perceived social or spiritual attributes—in short, inner beauty—rather than what is thought of as superficial characteristics (Ball et al. 2003; Brown and Gilligan 1992; Ellison 1993).

Religiosity is said to also impact decisions surrounding the sexual activity of Black adolescent girls. Greater religious involvement is associated with the delay of sexual activity, and for Black girls who are sexually active, religious involvement is associated with less sexual risk-taking, greater self-efficacy in communicating with sexual partners, and more positive attitudes toward condom usage (McCree et al. 2003).

Safety and Survival Skills among Black Girls

Black adolescent girls often are confronted with threats to their physical safety. They are more likely to report having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, forced to have sexual intercourse, and involved in dating violence than white girls or other girls of color (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2008b). In school, they are more likely than Black boys to be targeted by racist remarks, and more likely than white girls, to be subjected to sexist remarks (Grant 1984). Overall, Black girls are more likely than males and three times more likely than white females to avoid going to school altogether specifically due to safety concerns (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 2006).

Yet Black girls, more commonly than their white counterparts, display the tendency to protect themselves when met with aggression. They, in fact, have been found to be more likely to respond verbally or physically when faced with aggression and, ultimately, are more likely than white or Hispanic girls to have been involved in a physical altercation. Perhaps, as a result of their tendency towards
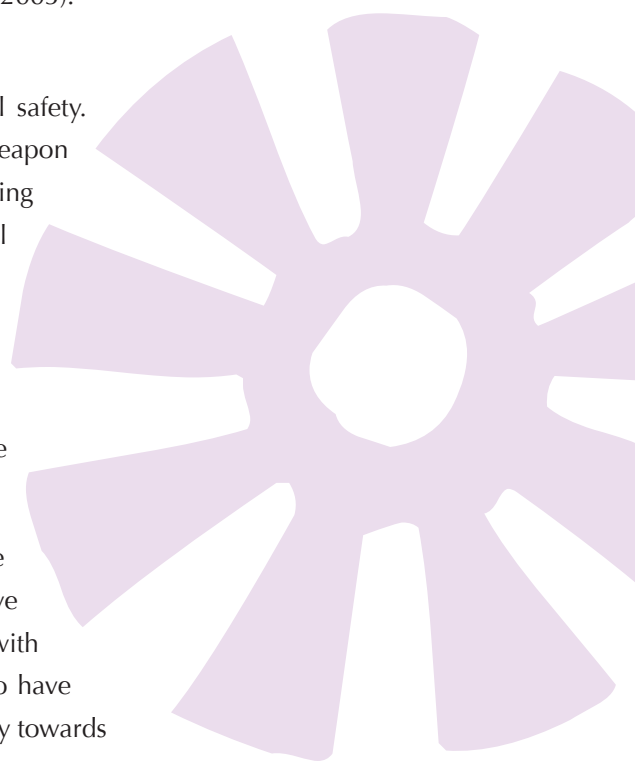
self-protection, the threat of aggression or acts of aggression have both been found to be less effective when used against Black girls (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 2006).

According to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, Black girls in low-income communities often lack a sense of safety and attachment in their own homes and neighborhoods (Wordes and Nunez 2002). This lack of safe spaces is at the root of their need for self-protection. A study of girls enrolled in an alternative school for "delinquent" youths found that due to the level of hostility found in their social environment, personal aggression was ultimately seen as a necessary survival tool (Pugh-Lilly et al. 2001).

Despite the tendency to protect themselves through verbal or physical aggression, Black females are ultimately more likely than others to have had experiences that meet the legal definition of rape; yet, they are significantly less likely than others to disclose such instances to the authorities. Particularly in comparison to whites, Black victims of sexual assault are much more likely to delay reporting such an offense (64 percent versus 36 percent; Wyatt 1992). Some believe this delay is due to the anticipation of an unsupportive response (Wyatt 1992). Research in the area suggests this perception, while unfortunate, may, in fact, be based in reality. One study (Donovan 2007) found that when provided details of a hypothetical date rape situation, individuals are more likely to believe such conduct is acceptable if the victim is Black. This lack of support, then, likely serves to perpetuate the hesitancy of Black victims of sexual assault to swiftly report the crime—or even themselves, recognize their own victimization (Wyatt 1992). It's also entirely possible that given the tendency towards self-protection, Black victims of sexual assault may be less willing to relay the offense, simply because doing so would be tantamount to admitted failure with respect to ensuring their own personal safety.

The Educational Experience of Black Girls

Although much worthy attention and concern has been given to the level of school failure experienced by Black boys, the data suggest that Black girls also, are in need of special attention. While Black girls are indeed more likely to earn a high school diploma than their male counterparts (59.6 percent versus 46.2 percent), they still lag behind others girls in this area, as well as most non-Black boys (Figure 1).

Further, Black girls continue to trail their female counterparts when it comes time for college enrollment (see Figure 2). While their enrollment rates do surpass those of Black boys by six percentage points (63 percent versus 57 percent), they trail those

Figure 1. High School Graduation Rates by Gender, Race and Ethnicity, 2003-2004

Boys
Girls

Black: 46.2% / 59.6%
Latino: 52.3% / 62.8%
White: 72.3% / 77.9%
Asian American: 76.5% / 82.1%
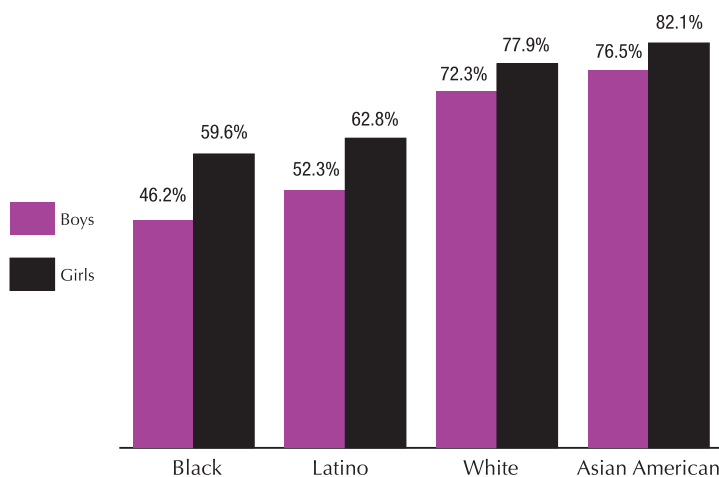
Source: Editorial Projects in Education 2007. Compiled by the Institute for Women's Policy Research

of white girls nearly twice as much (63 percent versus 74 percent), and lag behind Latina and Asian girls by 4 percent and 13 percent respectively. Yet, as Black girls transition into adulthood, acquiring a college degree is especially critical to their overall economic well-being. In spite of having labor force participation rates that eclipse those of white women, Asian American women, and Latinas (61.6 percent versus 58.9 percent, 58.2 and 55.3 percent, respectively; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2007a), it is Black women who are most likely to live in poverty. Their poverty rate is nearly three times that of white women (26.2 percent versus 9.3 percent), more than double that of Asian American women (10.1 percent), and higher than that of Latinas (22.6 percent; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2007b). And even though Black women are more likely to have been more successful in the schoolhouse than their male counterparts, in the world of work, Black women still trail Black men in earnings, and thus are more likely to experience poverty (26.2 percent versus 22.0 percent; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2007b). Even during their prime earning years (ages 35-44), Black women's exposure to poverty is more than one and a half times that of their Black male counterparts (19.7 percent versus 12.1 percent; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2007b).

Yet when Black women earn a four-year college degree, they are far less likely to live in poverty due to the earnings premium that goes along with that level of education. Black women with a four-year degree earn fully 92 percent more than Black women with only a high school diploma, compared to a 77 percent increase in earnings received by white women and an 88 percent increase received by Latinas (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2003). Certainly higher education is important to all, but Black women clearly stand to gain the most (Jones-DeWeever and Gault 2006).

While it is true that more could and should be done to improve the educational performance of Black boys, the needs of Black girls should not be glossed over or assumed to be "okay." Black girls need and deserve much more than an "okay" education if they are to have the best chance of escaping a life of poverty.

At the elementary and secondary level, research shows that Black girls do indeed face special challenges in the classroom that may hinder their ability to make the most of their educational experience. Some research suggests that teachers tend to focus less on the academic performance of Black girls than on their social decorum in an effort to promote what's thought of as more "ladylike" behavior (Grant 1992;

Figure 2. Immediate College Enrollment among High School Graduates by Gender, Race and Ethnicity, 2003-2004
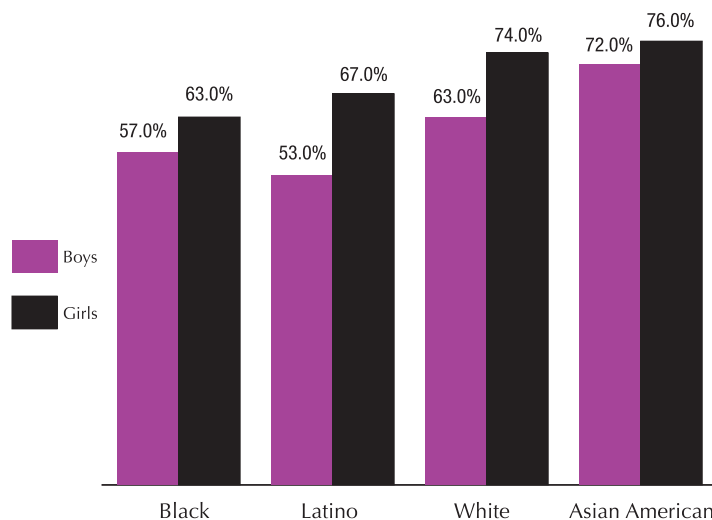
Source: The College Board 2006. Compiled by the Institute for Women's Policy Research

Horvat and Antonio 1999; Morris 2005; Morris 2007). In fact, research suggests that in the attempt to encourage Black girls to live up to a more docile vision of femininity, their classroom engagement is overtly thwarted, thus providing the potential for negative academic repercussions.

Over time, this and other negative actions in schooling environments stunt the long-term aspirations of Black girls. Some research finds that while early on, Black girls tend to exhibit high career aspirations, their ability to achieve those goals is subsequently marginalized by school staff, and ultimately regardless of socioeconomic background, Black girls tend to lower their occupational goals and aspirations, and report expecting lower levels of success by the time they reach the tenth grade (Lent and Brown 1996; Lent and Brown 2000). They then tend to lower their occupational choices even more by their senior year in high school—precisely the time when they should be gearing up for making their dreams happen (Lent and Brown 1996; Lent and Brown 2000).

In addition to their distinct academic challenges, Black girls face special social challenges as well, particularly in desegregated settings. In such environments, Black girls tend to be more socially isolated than their Black male counterparts perhaps as a result of Black boys' comparatively higher level of romantic desirability by the opposite sex across racial boundaries. They are also less likely than others to receive attention from peers and teachers, and ultimately, as a result, exhibit less overall social power (Grant 1984).

Yet most Black children, overall, face an uphill battle within the American educational system. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) attend high-poverty schools characterized by dilapidated facilities, high teacher turnover, high student-teacher ratios, high proportions of inexperienced teachers or teachers instructing classes outside of their fields, and scant supplies of even the basics (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2007). As such, Black boys are not the only ones struggling. Black girls struggle too and should have their special circumstances specifically addressed in order to be best prepared for the rest of their lives.

Black Girls and Romantic Relationships

Counter to the hyper-sexualized image and gold-digger persona of Black women and girls popularized in music videos and deeply entrenched within the psyche of broader American culture, research has shown that inner-city adolescent Black girls tend to enter romantic relationships for access to emotional intimacy or social status rather than direct monetary gain (Andrinopolous, Kerrigan, and Ellis 2006). Once in relationships, Black girls who personified strength and outspokenness in interactions with parents, teachers, and female friends, are found to less often assert themselves in their interactions with boyfriends in an attempt to not rock the boat and secure their partner's

exclusive attention (Andrinopolous, Kerrigan, and El-lis 2006). Some research suggests that fear of abandonment and an imbalance in the female-to-male sex ratio may result in limited control in relationships for young Black women and that this may in fact reduce their likelihood to negotiate safer sex practices thereby increasing their risk of HIV infection (Wingwood and DiClemonte 2000).

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS among Black women and Black girls has exploded in recent years. Black women, for instance, now make up the overwhelming majority (66 percent) of new HIV cases among all women, far outpacing diagnoses among Latinas and white women which stand at 16 percent respectively (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2007). Similarly, Black girls and young women ages 13 to 39 account for 58 percent of those newly diagnosed (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2007). In 2004 (the most recent year for which data are available), HIV was the leading cause of death among young Black women aged 25-34 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2008a). And the prevalence of the disease has been found to be greatest among those African Americans who live in the state of New York (Centers for Disease Control 2008a; The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2007).

Given the disproportionate impact of HIV on Black women and girls, assessing the prevalence of risk behaviors among Black adolescent girls becomes especially important. One study, the national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS) report, which provides results drawn from more than 14,0000 adolescents in grades 9 through 12 finds that while Black girls are more likely than white girls, for example, to have had sexual intercourse at an earlier age and are more likely to have been sexually active within the past three months, they are less likely than white adolescent girls to drink or engage in substance abuse before sexual activity, which can lead to other risky behavior such as unprotected sex (Centers for Disease Control 2008b). Black girls were also more likely to use condoms and to have been tested for HIV/AIDS than their white counterparts (Centers for Disease Control 2008b).

Another study focused exclusively on adolescent girls in New York found that white adolescent girls reported a higher total number of sex partners, more frequent recent sexual activity (within the past three months), more partners who used IV drugs, a greater number of episodes of vaginal sex without a condom, more frequent oral sex, and more frequent alcohol usage before sex (Morrison-Beedy, Nelson, and Volpe 2005). In fact, among all of the risk factors examined in the study, there were no behaviors in which Black girls reported a higher frequency of occurrences and among all factors measured, Black girls were only more likely to be found among two, those who had ever been tested for HIV (67 percent versus 42
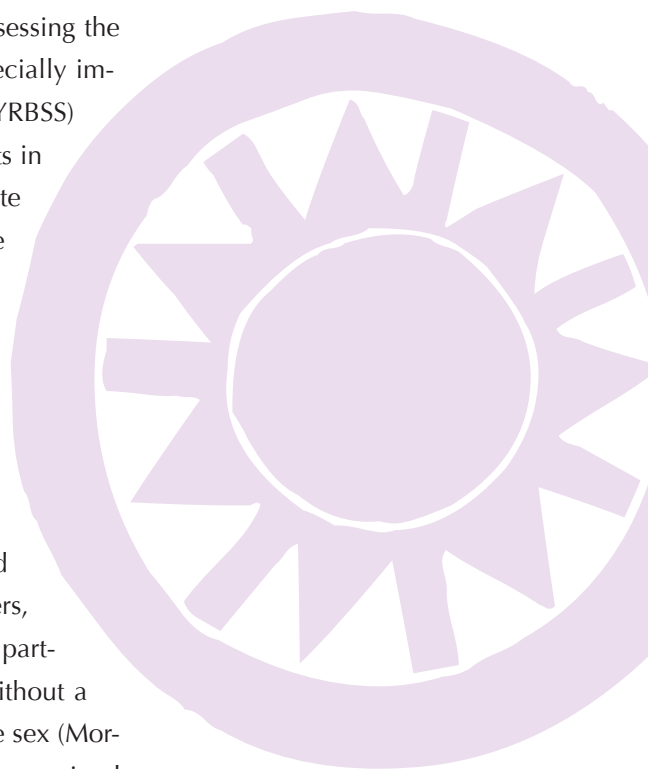
percent) and those who reported having a steady partner in the last three months (81 percent versus 77 percent; Morrison-Beedy, Nelson, and Volpe 2005). Despite their apparent more responsible behavior, Black girls still remain at increased risk of HIV infection. One can only speculate that Black girls' intensified risk is, at least in part, connected to their increased likelihood of engaging in relationships with older men, who given their longer sexual history have an increased likelihood of HIV infection. Other risk factors include what some have referred to as the "down-low" phenomenon, which refers to the prevalence of Black men who have sexual relationships with both men and women, but whom self-identify as heterosexual—an occurrence which some research suggest happens more often among Black men then their white counterparts (Centers for Disease Control 2003). Given these factors, it becomes critically important that sexually active Black girls engage in safer sexual practices through the use of condoms every time they engage in sex, even when involved in what they believe to be a serious, monogamous relationship.

All together, the literature, then, reveals the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the lives of Black girls. They are seen as both enviable among others for their self-confidence and healthier ideals with respect to body-image, yet they are also harshly critiqued for their perceived lack of refined femininity and far too womanly exterior in both appearance and action. The complexities of their lives and of the challenges that they face are explored in the remainder of this report through an analysis of the particular experiences and perspectives of Black girls in New York City.

II. Methodology and Sample

This study, which explores the lives of Black girls in the city of New York, utilized a mixed-mode data collection strategy which included a series of focus groups held among a total of 50 girls in New York as well as results drawn from an extensive written survey completed by a total of 78 girls throughout the city. The results reported then, are derived from a total study sample of 128 girls.
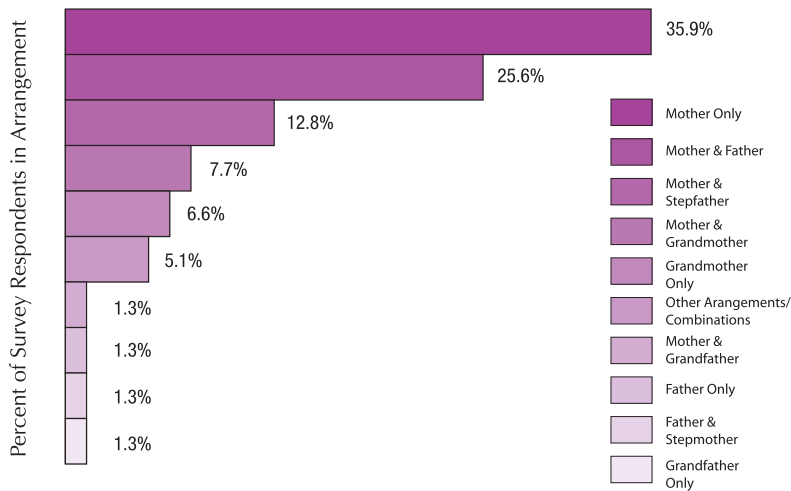
Over the course of this study, five focus groups were held in various community centers and schools throughout New York City. The groups took place between May and December of 2006 and included girls ranging in age from 9 to 19 years old. Results from the focus groups as well as information garnered from background research in the area were utilized to craft an extensive survey instrument which was comprised of a total of 111 primarily closed-ended questions covering a wide range of subject areas including issues of self-esteem, safety, support systems, religiosity, personal relationships, personal achievements, sexual activity, family responsibilities, and goals and aspirations. Upon completion of pre-testing in the Washington, DC area, the survey was distributed in written form and was in the field between April and June of 2007. A total of 240 surveys were distributed in each of the city's five boroughs with the help of a wide variety of service organizations that target Black girls. Each center was given a packet that included the surveys as well as introductory letters and permission forms that were provided to the parents or guardians of potential survey respondents. The parental letters included a broad overview of the study as well as a form that had to be signed and returned in order for girls under the age of 18 to participate. Ultimately, 78 surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of 32.5 percent.

Respondents to the survey lived in three of the city's five boroughs. Roughly 40 percent lived in the Bronx, 32 percent in Manhattan, and 28 percent in Staten Island. Some 40 percent were in middle school at the time of the survey and the remaining 60 percent were in high school. Most (81 percent) had lived in New York City all of their lives, although five percent indicated that had lived outside of the United States before settling in New York. Thus, while the vast majority of survey respondents are African American, they are not exclusively so. Our survey did not ask those from other countries to name their country of origin.
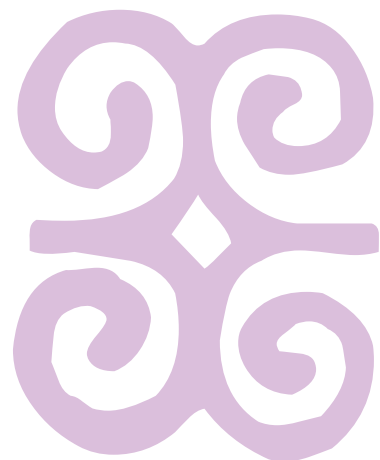
Most of the respondents lived within family units that included blood-relatives. Some 85 percent of all girls surveyed said that they lived with their mothers and about 36 percent lived with their mothers, only (Figure 3). Another 28 percent indicated that they lived with their fathers, but only 1.3 percent lived with their fathers, only. One in four girls surveyed lived with both their mothers and fathers. As shown in Figure 3, however, the girls in this study had a number of other family arrangements that included stepparents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Only 1.3 percent lived with a foster family and none lived with an adoptive family or within a group home (Figure 3).

Respondents were not asked to estimate their family's household income given the anticipated unreliability of the answers one might expect from posing such a question to minors. However, the survey did capture information on housing type to be used as somewhat of a proxy for income. Roughly 71 percent of the respondents indicated that they lived in an apartment, whereas 26 percent indicated that they lived in a house, and 3 percent said they lived in a shelter. While not perfect, given the prevalence of apartment usage within New York, upon closer examination of the data, some basic differences did emerge between apartment dwellers and those who lived in a free-standing home. For example, 73 percent of those who lived in an apartment indicated that there was frequent crime in their neighborhood as compared to 40 percent of those who lived in a house. Likewise, some 76 percent of those who lived in apartments indicated that they did not feel safe in their neighborhood as compared to only 19 percent of those who lived in houses. From this we extrapolate that at least three-quarters of our sample may reside in low-income communities and as such, most likely live within low-income households.

Figure 3. Living Arrangements of Survey Participants

Percent of Survey Respondents in Arrangement

- 35.9% — Mother Only
- 25.6% — Mother & Father
- 12.8% — Mother & Stepfather
- 7.7% — Mother & Grandmother
- 6.6% — Grandmother Only
- 5.1% — Other Arangements/ Combinations
- 1.3% — Mother & Grandfather
- 1.3% — Father Only
- 1.3% — Father & Stepmother
- 1.3% — Grandfather Only

Source: IWPR survey of Black girls in New York City.

III. Findings

Self-Perceptions among Black Girls

At first glance, the girls in this study embodied a self confidence that could perhaps best be described as somewhat of a bold swagger. But beyond the bold façade, several vulnerabilities emerged as the full breadth of their experiences were examined in tandem. Nearly all indicated that they loved themselves (91 percent), loved being Black (90 percent), and loved being a girl (92 percent). And when asked about the specific qualities that they liked most, a wide range of characteristics emerged. Most liked their ability to stick up for themselves (63 percent), their intelligence (62 percent), their independence as defined as the ability to take care of themselves (62 percent), and their friendliness (60 percent). Also commonly mentioned were physical attributes such as their complexion (56 percent), their hair (53 percent), their face (53 percent), and to a somewhat lesser degree, their body (50 percent).

Yet, if given the chance, many indicated that there were some things they would change about themselves if they could. Most often cited was the desire to change their grades (35 percent) followed by the hope of changing their body (21 percent), their hair (16 percent), or their ability to contribute to their household (12 percent). Yet, nearly one-third (30 percent) indicated that they would not change anything at all.

Among those who wanted to make changes, most often cited outside of the physical realm, was the desire to "work harder" in some sense, be it working harder in school (e.g. *"I would try to do better in my classes by working hard;" Learn more patience and try a litter harder in school"; "Study harder…"; "I would study more to get better grades")* or working harder around the house (e.g. *"Just taking more initiative towards work and chores that need to be done in the household;" "I could focus more and stop being so lazy around the house;" " My mom would be happier if I helped her out")*, the changes desired spoke volumes about their sense of responsibility, their work ethic as applied to both personal and communal needs, and their perceived ability to improve in areas that were important to them and important to the others that they valued in their lives.

Of those who wanted to make physical changes, however, the changes cited were not always those that one might expect. While several mentioned specifically that

they wanted to "lose weight" or "get slimmer," others lamented that they felt that they were "too skinny." One, very slim middle-school focus group participant was even more specific when she said, "I got three things I want to change…my booty, my waist, and my boobs." When pressed about the look she hoped to achieve, she ultimately stated, "I just want to jiggle." Thus to some, the goal was not necessarily one of being slim, it was, instead, an expressed desire to be voluptuous, or at least, more shapely. Other girls, though, made note of the media's influence in making the more shapely physique—particularly among Black women, the physical ideal. A few expressed a sense of fatalism inherent in personal body-type and seemed willing and quite happy to embrace their own personal form, even when that form failed to meet what they saw as the idealized notion of the Black woman's body. As one girl simply put it, "Big butt, little waist, big chest, and all of that—not everybody has that, not everybody can get that…that's not the way God made you. We got to be us…[if] we don't have straight hair, we don't got straight hair. If we don't got a big butt, we don't got a big butt. Just be yourself."

This issue of skin-tone was mentioned by only a few of the survey participants as an area of desired physical change (9 percent), but this issue came up time and time again in focus groups discussions, most notably among younger girls, many of whom expressed a prevalent desire to become lighter. One participant even mentioned that as a young child, she had a clear preference for white dolls—a preference that served as a point of contention between herself and her mother. She shared:

"When I was little, I never used to like Black dolls, I always played [with] the white dolls and my mother told me that if I don't get to like Black dolls I wouldn't get no dolls at all…so I just stopped playing with dolls."

When pressed about her preference, she said starkly, *"They make the Black dolls so dark!"*

Though the issue of skin tone came up frequently in focus groups, it seemed to not always be tied to issues of internal perceptions of what the broader culture defines as aesthetically pleasing. Instead, those girls who expressed the desire for lighter skin often did so because they sensed that others would treat them better, or because they had experienced teasing specifically related to their color. One girl said pointedly, *"…people keep on teasing me about my skin color, I'm dark, and I'm darker than the color of dark and all that, I'm night."* Another girl stated, *"I've been treated badly, because there is this boy in my class…he keep[s] on talking about how dark I am…and that makes me feel bad…"*

For others the color concern was not necessarily based in a contemporary experience, but instead based on how they anticipated whites would treat them as they grew older. One girl stated starkly, *"I feel like if I'm too Black, when I get older the Caucasian people might treat me slavish or some stuff like that…so I think I would get myself bleached a little bit."* Another, recalling exposure to apparently racist treatment in her past, shared a previous desire to bleach her skin, not just to appear lighter, but instead, to become white.

"A lot of non-Blacks will treat you differently and sometimes in class I change my name. I'm like, my name is Crystal and I change the way I talk and I change my style and everything and I said that I'm gonna bleach my skin white 'cuz a lot of white people treat me wrong and I feel just empty…I feel like I was born for no reason. I feel like I wasn't born for a purpose. They just mean to me 'cuz I was born for no reason…that's why I wish that I was white…but now I understand that I should not be white, 'cuz I would be the ghettoest white person ever [laughter]."

While the girl quoted above ended her remarks with a hint of humor, the pain she reflected on was nonetheless, palpable. The apparent vain search for approval from an outside and at times, hostile culture; the willingness to go to nearly any lengths to change yourself in a variety of ways in search of acceptance that never comes; and the feeling of emptiness and lack of purpose that is experienced upon rejection, all point to a harsh reality played out in the lives of far too many. Some have suggested that a strong sense of racial identity is invaluable in situations such as this, in that it provides an internal resource from which acceptance and reverence can be derived beyond the boundaries of the dominant culture's ideals (Tatum 1997). We will explore the impacts associated with strong racial identity later in this report, but for now it seems appropriate to indicate that our findings buttress those that indicate a variety of benefits garnered from a strong and secure sense of oneself manifested through holding a positive association with being Black.

All and all, though, most of the girls examined here stated that they were generally happy with themselves (83 percent), felt accepted by their peers (92 percent), and valued by those that they love (95 percent). Most have also expressed the formulation of a major goal in life (86 percent) and the vast majority believed that they have either a good or excellent chance of achieving that goal (90 percent). But beyond the internalized perceptions of Black girls, several external factors were found to pose distinct
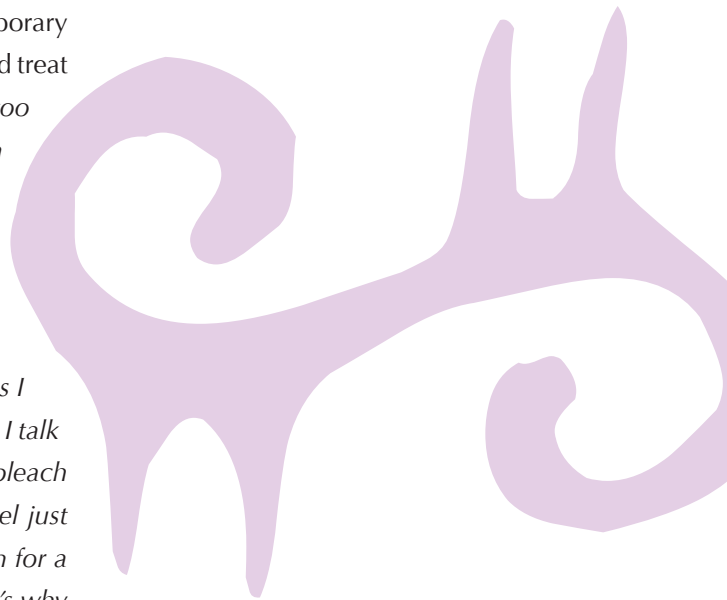
challenges to the lives, life-chances, and overall well-being. Below we explore these challenges as well as the broader experiences of Black girls.

Challenges in the Lives of Black Girls

Issues pertaining to safety and exposure to violence came up time and time again in focus group settings and throughout the survey responses. Overall, most survey respondents (60 percent) indicated that they worry about their personal safety. Girls who participated in focus groups also expressed concern.

One girl stated quite matter-of-factly, *"A female is never safe."*

Another stated strikingly:

"I worry about my safety everyday. You never know when it's your last day, you never know which crazy man is walking behind you while you regular shopping in the grocery store. You need to worry, that's important…ya'll need to worry about ya'll safety, every minute, every second and every hour."

Others seemed resigned to life in dangerous surroundings, and perhaps as a coping strategy, had grown numb to the perils surrounding them everyday. One focus group participant stated frankly, *"I'm like used to that, the ghetto and the hood and stuff like that, so like it doesn't matter. Like shootouts, they happen everyday. I'm just lucky not to be in the crossfire."*

Many relayed personal stories of all too real experiences with dangerous situations.

"Around my area they have gun fights. You know, like you actually walk in and somebody get in an argument all of a sudden…you see the gun load off or whatever. In my house, sometimes...my whole house is dark and all of a sudden I hear gunshots… loading off in my neighborhood. And…it ma[kes] me feel scared because I have little siblings that come around my house and I…worry about them."

"I'm not going to lie, I saw a gun before. Me and my nephew was there…You know how they have the commercials with the gun and how it load off and it shot the other person? I had actually a flashback on that and I quickly put the gun away and told my nephew to 'let's go' because, you know, I was scared that, God forbid, the gun would have loaded off into my nephew…I would have never forgive[n] myself."

"I live in a three story building and there's drug dealers that live [in the building]. I live on top of them, they live on the second and I live on the third [floor]. [When] I'm sleeping, I'm thinking like, 'What if they just have problems, and start shooting up? I'm like, 'Who will get shot first?"

Others described how through personal savvy or under the protection of others, they were able to navigate potentially dangerous situations:

"I noticed a car following me…what saved me is he reached the traffic light and it was red, so that gave me time to cross the street and it turned green and he still following me. So he says something to me…he was like, 'Can I talk to you for a minute?' And I said, 'Do you want to talk to 911?'…and then as I was walking another car came up…I had to act like I was walking to another group of boys, just for them to [leave me alone]."

"…I'm going to the corner store, so I'm walking and all of a sudden I see this Black car, you know, stopping. And I didn't know and he didn't know that my brother was right down the block coming. So…he actually came out the car [and said,] 'Can I talk to you?' I'm like no, can you get away? And you know, if my brother hadn't come [and said] 'What is you doing? That's my little sister!' And if it wasn't for my brother, God forbid…I don't know where I would be right now."
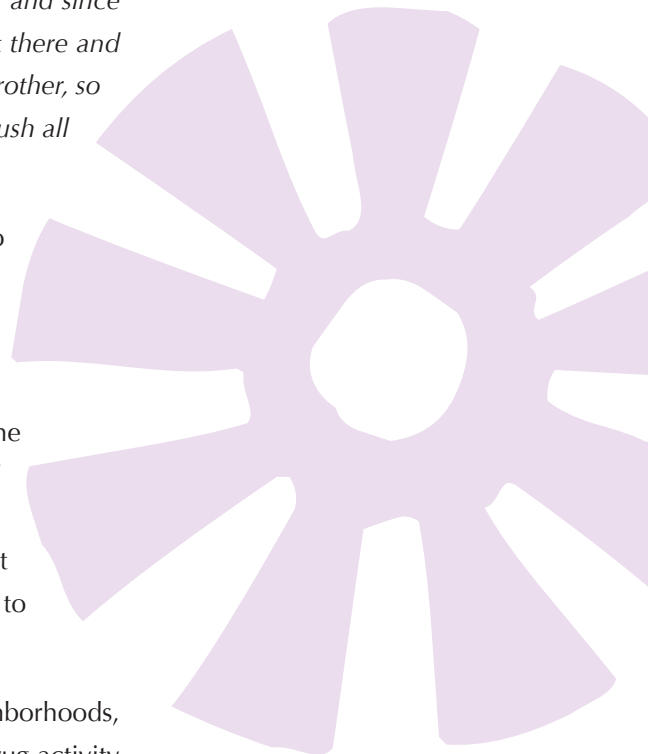

Overall, a higher proportion of teenagers worried about their safety (62 percent) than did preteens (56 percent), yet when faced with perceived danger, most girls seemed to have a coping strategy, and ultimately responded in a variety of ways. Below a girl in middle school describes her strategy for protecting herself and younger sibling when she senses danger:

"[My neighbor] sell[s] drugs and stuff, you could see straight across. So any time I hear them arguing' or somethin' I just get up out of my bed and I have like a closet, it's little, but it's filled with boxes and stuff…so what I do is I take my brother and since my grandmother, like, she works…so she's not there, and my mother not there and sometimes my stepfather's not there and nobody's home but me and my brother, so I just go in the closet and we just hide and talk, and play games and we push all the boxes up and everything and just cover ourselves with a sheet "

Although boxes and blankets are no match for bullets, her attempt to do what she could to protect both herself and her brother showed a sense of efficacy and a level of maturity well beyond her years.

Survey participants also relayed strategies for dealing with unsafe situations. The most-often cited strategy was to seek to remove oneself from the situation (74 percent), next, was the tendency to prepare to defend oneself (49 percent) or seek out a friend or family member to help *"back them up"* (40 percent). A significant proportion also indicated that they sought advice from a parent (37 percent) or another adult (21 percent) about how to deal with a situation that made them feel unsafe.

Overall, among those who indicated that they felt unsafe in their neighborhoods, most indicated that their feelings of uneasiness spawned from frequent drug activity in their communities (68 percent), as well as the prevalence of violent crime (64 per-

cent), fights (59 percent), or gang activity (55 percent). Over one-quarter (27 percent) also said that they felt bullied in their communities and among survey participants, most who felt unsafe at school indicated that they felt unsafe due to frequent fights at school (89 percent). In focus groups though, girls seemed resigned to the fact that, at times, fighting in school was a necessary evil.

"Well, most of the time adults aren't around so really your main choice is that you have to stick up for yourself because even if an adult was there…and trying to stop it, you can't just stand there and let the person keep on hitting, so you have to stand up for yourself, that's the way I see it."

Some of the most disturbing examples of danger faced by girls in this study were linked to issues of sexual abuse experienced well beyond the confines of a classroom. A few focus group participants opened up about victimization they had survived for years. While now in high school, the pain from an abusive past remains, and continues to manifests itself in a variety of ways.

"At a young age, I was molested by my uncle, around four or five. That's why I don't like men. I really can't look them in the face—[not]… for a long period of time. I bend my head down and look on the ground… I don't like men touching me; if I give them pounds* I don't like them touching me that much either. I had boyfriends and stuff, but I don't get really intimate. I don't really get into it. I see my uncle's face. I used to be a bad kid because I used to hide a lot of stuff. I just came out at the age of 18. I just told everybody what happened. I held it in for a long time."

"I was molested on two separate occasions. I got raped and [was] molested over a period of seven years and I'm only fifteen. When I tell people stuff like that and that I was suicidal they look at me like, 'what's wrong with you?' But you never really know until you go through the pain. Nobody knows how it feels just to be taken out of your body and have somebody take something from you that you called your own."

One survivor shared how she reacts physically to situations she believes might bring about pain.

"…I squeeze up. My mind tells my body, like when I feel like something is about to happen to me or I feel like I'm in danger, I squeeze up and I get numb. If anything were to happen, I wouldn't feel the pain…I've been in pain so much that when I know it's coming, I don't really feel it no more. It's nothing."

Another survivor of molestation laments her stolen childhood when she says, *"It's like I never had the chance to play with Barbie dolls when I*

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*A "pound" is a form of greeting that entails touching fists together.

was a kid. So, when I see them [her younger siblings] playing around, playing tag and everything, I be happy. I'm jealous, but I be happy like, 'Damn, I wish I was eight.'"

The loss of innocence stolen through abuse is not easily erased. But these girls and others like them clearly need assistance through counseling and other psychological services to help them continue to work through the lingering pain and sense of isolation that they feel if they are to one day be capable of being at peace with themselves and ultimately enjoying life to its fullest potential.

Aside from navigating issues of physical and sexual violence, other major challenges in the lives of Black girls are those that come with living on the economic fringe. For many, growing up with a strong sense of responsibility due to the need to "pitch in" to help their families both economically and through the provision of other forms of household support, such as caring for siblings while adults are at work, running errands, or completing daily chores. Most high school focus group participants worked in addition to going to school, as did about half (51 percent) of the high school survey respondents. Some worked as much as 24 hours per week, from 5:00 PM to 11:00 PM, four days per week. This left little time for schoolwork or for the college application process. Yet, girls who worked clearly took pride in their financial independence and wore their ability to meet their own needs as somewhat of a badge of honor. One high school student put it this way, *"If you don't buy it yourself with your money that you worked for, it's nothing. If your mother bought it, oh well, so what?"* Another added, *"I do for myself and I like it. It's hard, but I like it. It gives [me] a sense of responsibility."*

Others discussed how they chipped in at home, either by giving part of their earnings to their parent, or by purchasing necessities for themselves so that their parents didn't have to.

"I love my mom to death, but I depend on myself and I don't have to depend on nobody. Every time I get money, I give my mother money. And my little brothers, they do the same thing."

...My mother has five other kids from five men, and my father got seven kids besides me. I got a really big family and I was getting sick of always having to wait until after my brother got a new pair of sneakers or after my sister got a new outfit, so I was just like, forget it, I'm going to make my own money so I don't have to wait for nobody. When I put in enough effort and work, my check comes in good and I get what I want for myself. That's where my level of maturity comes in at when I realized, 'what's the point of waiting for it when I can get it for myself?!'
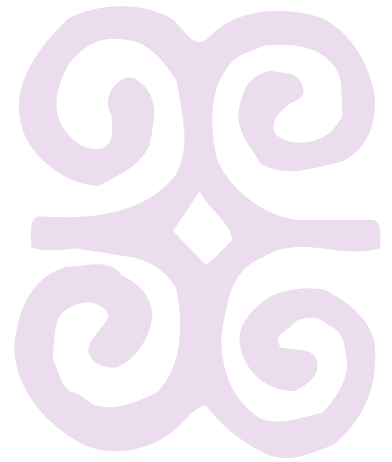
While many contributed economically to their households—either directly or in-directly, others, like the fifteen-year old below, contributed by looking out for their siblings, acting almost as second mothers despite their own very tender age.

"I got an eleven year-old sister and my other sister is turning ten on Monday. It's like I've been through a lot in my life even though I'm mad young, I don't want them to repeat my steps and think that it's ok to not go to school and not doing this and that…I don't want them to be like me in the negative way. When I see them doing that, I will argue with them. My mother will scream at me, like, they only kids, and [she's] right, but I know where those things are going to lead to. I'm trying to stop it now so they can live a better life than me."

Another adds:

"Some people are forced to be grown. For me, I was. '–pick up your brother at five, make sure you pick him up at five o'clock, make sure you give him [his] homework, make sure they eat, make sure you do this'…so she [her mother] could get us money, she…be working."

Having the responsibilities of adulthood, for some, resulted in the belief that they should also have what they thought to be the pleasures of adulthood as well. As one girl put it, *"Once you get…the mentality of, 'okay, I'm grown.' I'm going to do what I want to do… If I want to go drink, I'll drink. If I want to go smoke, I'll smoke, and there's nothing you can tell us, nothing nobody can tell me. My mom can say something, okay—she's punishing me for two weeks…next day, she's send[ing] me to the store."*

And while this rebelliousness can lead to trouble for some, the independence that is gained through employment results in a mixed bag of outcomes for others. Girls in our survey who indicated that they were employed, were more likely than others to also say that they were happy with themselves (90 percent versus 78 percent) perhaps due to the pride they gained through some level of financial independence. Yet, overall, those who were employed were less likely to indicate that they felt happy on a typical day than those who were not employed (47 percent versus 53 percent) and were more than twice as likely to indicate that they routinely felt stressed (32 percent versus 12 percent).

In terms of impacts on education, those who held jobs were more likely to indicate that they were serious about their schoolwork (71 percent versus 67 percent), and perhaps as a result, they were more likely to report that they typically received A's or B's on their report card than those who were not employed (53 percent versus 47 percent respectively).

But despite better performance in the classroom, employed girls were much less likely to indicate that they liked school than those who were not employed (65 percent versus 83 percent). They were also less likely than those who were not employed to indicate that they wanted to go to college (76 percent versus 86 percent respectively). It could be that for some, the supplemental income that is earned on the job—78 percent reported earning between $7.00 and $9.00 per hour—is just enough to make them feel comfortable in their current situation. When living at home with family and other supports, at least part of that income can go towards extras like cell phones, the latest clothes, or recreational activities or events. It might be difficult, then, to grasp the long-term implications of giving up or at least, reducing immediate earnings opportunities, for long-term payoffs that can be acquired by receiving a college degree.

Keen differences also emerged in this study between those girls who were employed and those who were not employed with regards to their personal relationships. Teenagers who were employed were far more likely to have a boyfriend than those who were not employed (75 percent versus 44 percent) and were half as likely to indicate that they were virgins (35 percent versus 76 percent). Yet, among all girls who had boyfriends, those who did not work were more likely to believe that their boyfriend was faithful (77 percent versus 67 percent), while those who worked were much more likely to indicate that they were unsure about their boyfriend's faithfulness (27 percent versus 9 percent).

Overall, the girls in this study seemed to exude a strong sense of independence. Many expressed a quite a matter-of-fact expectation of doing for themselves, by themselves, or at least, with what they perceived as very little help for others. To receive assistance was seemingly portrayed as a sign of weakness. Certainly, in moving forward with the development of ideas aimed at meeting the distinct needs of Black girls it is important to keep in mind the need to reach out to this population in a way that will not be interpreted as paternalistic, but rather, in a way that empowers girls as equal and authoritative in the process of improving their life chances.

Romantic Relationships among Black Girls

Broadly interpreted, the romantic lives of Black women and girls have long been intertwined with U.S. public policy. From the days of the slave codes which maternally passed down the designation of enslavement or freedom, to the "man in the house" rules of the welfare we used to know, to today's marriage promotion initiatives, Black women and girls, public policy, and family formation have long been intertwined.
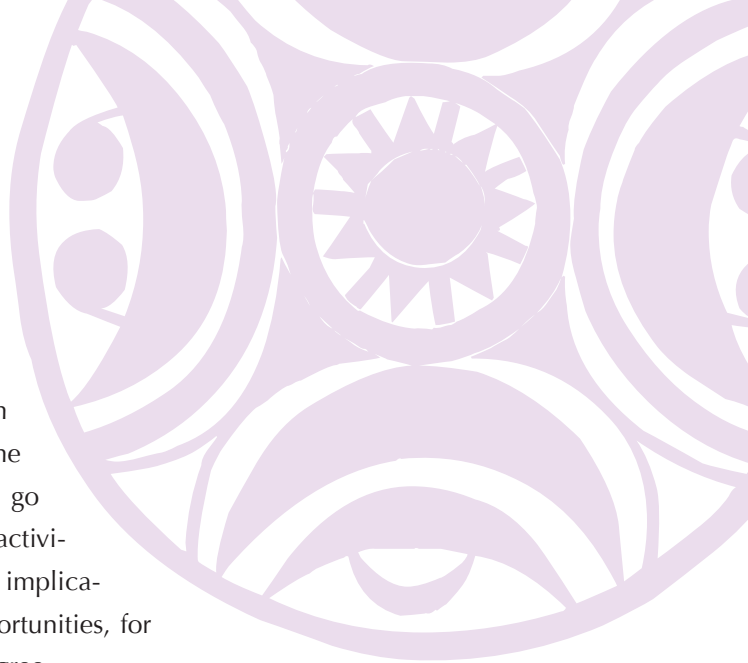
The girls in this study though, approach ideas of romance very much detached from this broader context, yet with an air of innocence and sincerity that clings to one basic demand—that of respect.

Over half (52 percent) of the girls surveyed indicated that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. As one would expect, a much higher proportion of girls in high school (59 percent) indicated that they had boyfriends than those who were in middle school (40 percent). Most indicated that their relationship was good (72 percent) and that they felt loved (69 percent) and understood (72 percent). All said (100 percent) that they felt their boyfriend respected them and most believed (69 percent) that their boyfriend did not pursue other girls.

Table 1. Greatest Influence on Life

Mother	48%
Friend	15%
Sister	11%
Brother	9%
Father	8%
Grandparent	8%
Higher Power	8%
Celebrity	6%
Program Leader	5%
Other	5%
Boyfriend	5%
Teacher	3%

*Sum may exceed 100 percent as respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Source: IWPR survey of Black girls in New York City.

Focus group participants made clear that there are certain qualities they look for when making decisions about the suitability of a potential boyfriend. Generally speaking, they wanted someone who was honest and loving, someone who was intelligent, ambitious, and handsome, someone who would treat them with respect, but was also tough enough to protect them if the need arose. Yet, overall, boyfriends did not seem to be the central relationship in the lives of Black girls. Far from it, as Tables 1 and 2 indicate, when asked about life influences, family and friends took precedent over boyfriends in the minds of Black girls. Boyfriends seemed especially likely to play a small role in terms of influence, ranking behind not only parents, siblings, and friends, but also behind the influence that a Higher Power/God played in their lives, and even falling below the influence of celebrities (see Table 1). Yet boyfriends were more frequently mentioned by the girls surveyed here as being a source to turn to for advice (16 percent), in this case falling only behind best friend (52 percent), mother (40 percent), and other family members (20 percent). Boyfriends then, were impactful on the lives of Black girls, but certainly did not at all seem to be their central focus (Table 2).

When it came to the issue of sexual activity, the girls in this study had very strong opinions and fixed ideals about the decisions that they had made, or the decisions, that were in some cases, forced upon them. Most survey respondents indicated that they were virgins (65 percent). Nearly all (94 percent) said they were happy with the sexual decisions that they had made in their personal lives. Girls who were virgins often mentioned that they were proud of themselves for maintaining their virginity. Many made reference to their religious beliefs and mentioned that they wanted to wait until marriage before having sex. Several others said that they were just too young to have sex and did not want to worry about pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. Others stated that they had goals in life, and felt that they needed to

achieve those goals before engaging in sexual activity. While some were simply willing to wait for "Mr. Right," as one young lady put it, "I don't want to lose my virginity to just anyone. I want to make sure that he loves me and respects me and accepts me for who I am."

Among those girls who were not virgins most indicated that they made the decision to become sexually active because they thought the time was right for them (86 percent). According to the responses of our survey participants, most girls indicated that they were well into their teens when they began taking part in sexual activity. Among girls who had sex, a plurality indicated that they lost their virginity at the age of 16 (43 percent), yet as Figure 4 below indicates, a significant number admitted to engaging in sexual activity at a very young age. In fact more girls said that they had engaged in sex at the age 13 or younger (14 percent) than indicated that they had waited until the age of 17 to become sexually active (10 percent).

Interestingly, less than half (48 percent) of the survey participants indicated that they thought they were in love when they lost their virginity. Yet, most (83 percent) said that they had not felt pressured to do something they did not want to do, and instead, indicated that they made the conscious decision to have sex when they believed that the time was right for them (86 percent). Over two-thirds (68 percent) of those who were not virgins indicated that they were currently sexually active and a slight majority (55 percent) indicated that they always use condoms when engaging in sex. Nearly two-thirds of all respondents (64 percent) and nearly one-third (29 percent) of girls who indicated that they were currently sexually active had never visited a gynecologist, a quite disturbing finding among girls who admit to participating in sexual activity.

In focus groups, more than a few girls expressed regret over losing their virginity. One girl stated longingly, "…I'd give anything to get my virginity back. It's like [losing] your innocence." Most, though, stuck by their decision to engage in sexual relationships and expressed confidence in their ability to make decisions they believed were right for them.

Support Systems

As independent and self assured as Black girls are and aspire to be, like all of us, they still need systems of support to lean on in times of distress. The girls in this study were no exception to this rule, and many

Table 2. Who Survey Respondents Turn to for Advice

Best Friend	52%
Mother	40%
Other Family Member	20%
Boyfriend	16%
Yourself	12%
Father	8%
Program Leader	8%
Grandparent	7%
Teacher	7%
Pastor	1%

*Sum may exceed 100 percent as respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Source: IWPR survey of Black girls in New York City.

Source: IWPR survey of Black girls in New York City.

Figure 4. Age Virginity Lost

13 or Younger	14 years Old	15 Years Old	16 Years Old	17 Years Old
14%	10%	24%	43%	10%
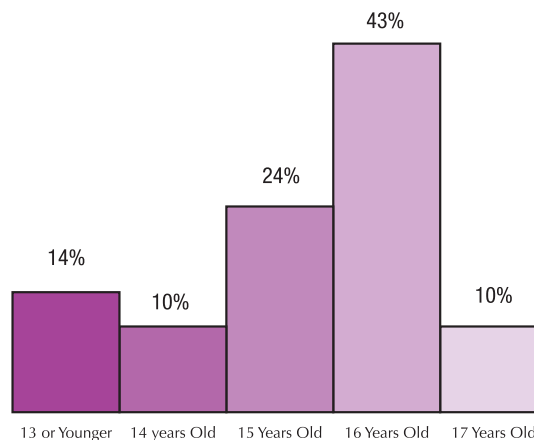
had in place multiple layers of support that helped them traverse the tough times, celebrate the good times, and navigate the twists and turns of their daily existence.

Most of the survey respondents indicated that they lived with their mother (85 percent), their father (28 percent), or their grandmother (14 percent). Only one in four said that they lived with both their mother and father in the household. Most others lived in some kind of parental/nonparental combination or nonparental arrangement, such as parents and stepparents, parents and extended family, extended family, or a foster family. Regardless of family form, the quality of the relationship between the girls and their caregivers had multifaceted repercussions on their lives. Overwhelmingly (92 percent) girls said that having a good relationship with their caregiver was important to them. Almost all (93 percent) believed that their primary caregiver loved them and most believed (84 percent) that their caregiver had their best interests at heart. Just over half (57 percent) actually rated their relationship with their caregiver as good or excellent, with less than one-quarter (24 percent) giving this relationship the highest rating. But among those who did, quite striking impacts were found. For example, those girls who indicated that they had an excellent caregiver relationship with their caregiver were most likely to also indicate that they felt happy on a typical day (78 percent), and as the quality of the relationship went down, so too did the percentage of girls who indicated feelings of happiness.

Similarly, nearly all of the girls (94 percent) who described their caregiver relationship as excellent, also said that they were happy with themselves as compared with 83 percent who described their caregiver relationship as "good," 79 percent who described their relationship as "alright, but could be better," and 75 percent who said their relationship was not very good.

A majority of girls (56 percent) who indicated that their relationship with their caregiver was excellent also reported receiving mostly A's or B's on their report card. This compares with 48 percent of those who said their relationship was good and 40 percent who said their caregiver relationship was only "alright."

Girls with excellent caregiver relationships also tend to believe in themselves. Some 63 percent who reported excellent relationships also believed they had an excellent chance of achieving their goals as compared to only 40 percent who rated their caregiver relationship as only "alright."

Likewise, girls with high quality of caregiver relationships were less likely to engage in sexual activity. Four in five girls (81 percent) who said their caregiver relationship was excellent also indicated that they were still virgins, compared with only one in
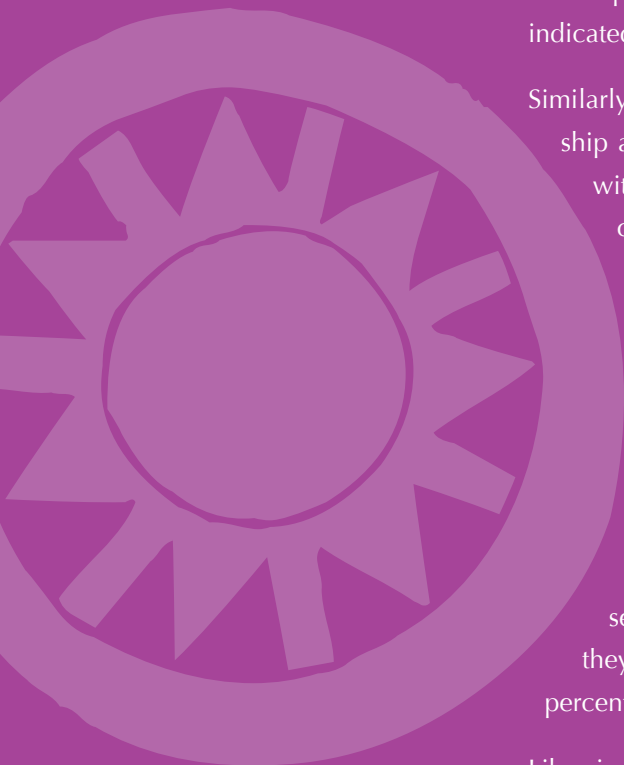
four girls who rated their relationship as "not very good," and none of the girls who said their relationship with their caregiver was horrible.

But even if caregiver relationships do not reach the standard of "excellence," nearly as important was the issue of feeling understood. Just over half (52 percent) of the survey participants indicated that they felt understood by their caregiver and those who did were much more likely to report feeling happy on a typical day than those who felt misunderstood (68 percent versus 29 percent). They were also much more likely than those who felt misunderstood to indicate that they received mostly A's or B's on their report card (50 percent versus 31 percent) and that they had maintained their virginity (72 percent versus 41 percent respectively).

The quality of family relationships clearly matters in the lives of Black girls. But families represent only a sliver of the potential support mechanisms available to and utilized by Black girls. Also important to many of the girls included in this study was the issue of spirituality and religiosity. There too, we find another system of support to which many Black girls look.

Examining the Effects of Spirituality and Religiosity

Almost all of the survey respondents (92 percent) indicated that having a spiritual relationship with God or some higher power was important to them, with most (70 percent) indicating that such a relationship was very important. Overall, we found that girls who highly valued such a relationship also tended to do better at school were more likely to have excellent relationships at home, and to feel good about themselves. For example, over half (53 percent) of those who indicated that having a spiritual relationship was very important to them indicated that they received mostly A's or B's on their report card, compared with only about one-third (33 percent) of those who said that such a relationship was only somewhat important. Only 4.5 percent of those who indicated that a spiritual relationship was not important indicated that they typically earned a B or better on their report cards. Likewise, girls who said that having a spiritual relationship was very important to them were especially likely to indicate that they wanted to go to college. Fully 90 percent of such girls indicated that they had college aspirations, and most believed they had an excellent chance of achieving their ultimate life goals (56 percent).

We also found that girls who indicated that they were happy with themselves were much more likely to indicate the importance of spirituality in their lives. Some 75 percent of the girls who said they were happy with themselves also said that having a spiritual relationship was very important to them, as compared to 20 percent who
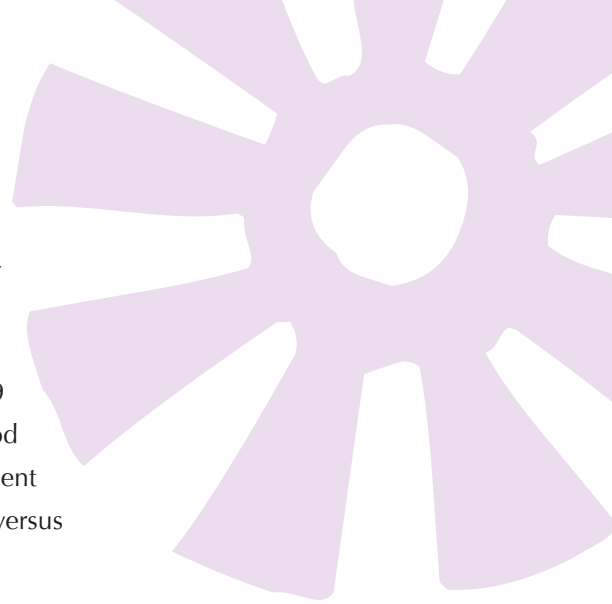
said such a relationship was only somewhat important and only 5 percent of those who said that having a relationship with a higher power was unimportant to them. Likewise, girls who indicated that spirituality was very important to them were more likely to say that they felt happy on a typical day (58 percent) than those who said such a relationship was only somewhat important (40 percent) or not important at all (0 percent).

Girls who were spiritual were also more likely to say that they had an excellent relationship with their caregiver (28 percent) than those who said a spiritual relationship was only somewhat important (18 percent) to them. Of all the girls who indicated that having a spiritual relationship was unimportant to them, none reported having an excellent relationship with their caregiver.

Girls who felt a strong spiritual relationship were just as likely to have a boyfriend as girls who did not, however. In fact, those girls who most highly rated the importance of a spiritual relationship in their lives were, in fact, the most likely to indicate that they had a boyfriend (56 percent versus 47 percent who said a spiritual relationship was somewhat important and 50 percent who said such a relationship was unimportant). In addition, girls who did not believe a spiritual relationship was important were more likely to say that they had not had sex than those who said that having a spiritual relationship was very important (75 percent versus 66 percent). And among those who indicated that they were sexually active, girls who placed a high value on spirituality were most likely insist on condom usage every time they engaged in sex (57 percent versus 50 percent of those who indicated that spirituality was only somewhat important or was unimportant).

Just as spirituality is important for most of the girls in this study, so was expressing their spirituality through participation in religious settings. Most girls, no matter how often they participated in religious services indicated that they felt happy with themselves. Girls who did so on a weekly basis were the most likely to say that they were generally happy with themselves (91 percent) while those who said they never attended such services were the least likely (75 percent). Yet, attending services on a weekly basis seemed to lessen one's chances at feeling happy on a typical day. Ultimately, those who attended services monthly were the most likely to indicate that they felt happy on a typical day (80 percent) as compared to just over half (54 percent) who said that they rarely attended religious services, and nearly half (48 percent) of weekly service attendees. Only one-quarter (25 percent) of those who said that they never attend religious services indicated that they felt happy on a typical day.

Those who attended religious services most often were also the most likely to report having received A's or B's on their report card. Over three-fourths (78 percent) of monthly services attendees received mostly A's or B's on their report card as did 65 percent of weekly church attendees. Those who attended services rarely or only a couple of times per year were the least likely to report receiving mainly high grades (27 percent and 17 percent respectively).

Girls who said that they attended services on a weekly basis were the most likely to indicate that they were serious about their schoolwork (95 percent), as did roughly two-thirds of those who attended services either monthly (60 percent), a couple of times per year (67 percent), or whom never attended religious services (67 percent). Less than half of those who said they rarely attended church (48 percent) said that they took their schoolwork seriously.

In terms of future ambitions, most girls indicated that they wanted to go to college, but those who attended services on a weekly on monthly basis were most likely to do so (91 percent and 90 percent respectively) while those who said they never attended services were the least likely to do so (72 percent).

Those who attended religious services on a weekly basis were more than twice as likely to indicate that they had an excellent chance of achieving their ultimate goal than did those girls who attended services on a monthly basis (63 percent versus 30 percent) or who said that they rarely attended religious services (63 percent versus 27 percent). Interestingly however, those who said that they only attended services a couple of times a year were just as likely as weekly service attendees to believe their chances of obtaining their goal to be excellent (63 percent versus 63 percent respectively) and among those who said that they never attended services, 50 percent believed their chances of achieving their goal were excellent.

In terms of romantic relationships, those who never attended religious services were the least likely to indicate that they had a boyfriend (25 percent), while those attended only a couple times a year were the most likely (75 percent). Over half of weekly service attendees (57 percent) indicated that they had a boyfriend.

Among weekly church attendees, roughly two-thirds (67 percent) said they considered themselves to be a virgin, while those who attended church only a couple of times per year were the least likely to say they were virgins (50 percent). But among those who were sexually active, weekly services attendees were the most likely to indicate that they always used condoms (80 percent), whereas those who indicated that they rarely attend services were the least likely (46 percent). One might suspect
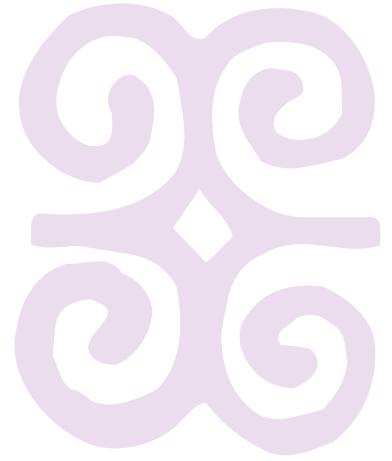
that the huge difference in proclivity to insist on condom usage is related to stigmas surrounding pregnancy for those girls who are regular religious service attendees.

In terms of relationship quality between girls and their caregivers, weekly service attendees were far and away the least likely to indicate an excellent relationship at only 9 percent, about half the rate of those who said they rarely attended services (19 percent). Monthly attendees, though, were the most likely to indicate an excellent caregiver relationship (60 percent).

The Protective Effects of Strong Racial Identity in the Lives of Black Girls

Family ties and spiritual grounding are not the only factors that our research suggests are related to the well-being of Black girls. Our survey findings suggest that a strong racial identity can play an important role in the lives Black girls in a variety of ways. Overall, we found that just under half of the girls in our survey (45 percent) would describe themselves as strongly in touch with their racial heritage, or "afrocentric." Striking differences emerged between girls who identified as afrocentric and those who did not. For example, girls who described themselves as afrocentric were much more likely to say they were happy on a typical day (63 percent) than those who said they were not afrocentric (53 percent) or those who did not know how they would classify themselves (41 percent).

Girls who thought of themselves as afrocentric were also the best performers in the classroom. They were much more likely to indicate a serious commitment to their schoolwork than were their non-afrocentric counterparts (89 percent versus 57 percent). Their expressed commitment to schooling ultimately paid off in the classroom. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of the girls who self-identified as afrocentric said that they received mainly A's or B's on their report cards as compared to only 47 percent of those who said they were not afrocentric. Yet, despite making better grades and being more serious about their schoolwork, afrocentric girls were less likely to indicate that they actually liked school (73 percent versus 82 percent), perhaps in reaction to what they viewed as eurocentricity in the curriculum. Still, afrocentric girls were more likely to express a desire to go to college (84 percent) than those who said they were not afrocentric (76 percent) and were roughly three times more likely to believe they would ultimately achieve their goals (64 percent versus 21 percent).

The Black girls in our study with a strong racial identity also tended to have strong relationships. Afrocentric girls, for example, were slightly more likely to indicate that they had a good or excellent relationship with their caregiver (63 percent versus 59 percent). They were also much more likely than others to indicate that they had a spiritual relationship with God or some higher power (84 percent versus 38 percent). In terms of romantic relationships, girls who were afrocentric were more likely to have boyfriends (50 percent versus 41 percent), yet they were also more likely to indicate that they were virgins (72 percent) than those who did not describe themselves as afrocentric (65 percent). In addition, among those who were sexually active, self-described afrocentric girls were much more likely to indicate that they always used condoms (71 percent) than girls who said they were not afrocentric (50 percent). In sum, girls with a strong racial identity had a strong sense of self-worth, strong academic performance, and better relationships with family and others.

IV. Addressing the Needs of Black Girls

Clearly, Black girls in New York City live exceedingly complex lives. Even through heartbreaking circumstances and a mountain of responsibility, they somehow manage to exhibit a level of strength, intelligence, and determination that is well beyond their years. Many of the girls included in this study had already experienced what some would assume to be a lifetime's worth of pain. Be it the still raw experiences of suffering through years of sexual abuse at the hands of a "trusted" family member, the pain associated with growing up in surroundings so full of danger that a closet, a blanket, and some boxes are seen as one's only space of potentially life-saving refuge, or the pain of just believing that in spite of the multitude of talents and abilities that are held within, the color of your skin brings into question the point of one's very existence. These are the harsh and hurtful realities experienced by some of our girls—Black girls—as they traverse the path toward womanhood.

But despite their struggles, the journey wages on and in that journey, the girls examined here found several respite spots for renewal and sustenance. Through the support of good familial relationships, a sense of connection to a higher power, and a strong sense of pride through racial identity, many girls found self-worth, achieved academic excellence, formed more self-protective habits in romantic relationships, held high aspirations, and believed that they would, in fact, make their dreams come true.

What Black girls need for the best chance at positive life-outcomes should not be beyond the reach of any child. But to impact the particular challenges and circumstances they face, an approach that binds together parents, concerned community members, effective policymakers, and the girls themselves, would together, result in a powerful coalition that could work towards creating environs more conducive to the healthy development of Black girls.

The following recommendations represent steps toward reaching these goals:

• **IMPLEMENT A SERIES OF DEBRIEFING SESSIONS WITH KEY COMMUNITY LEADERS.** The sessions should be held with policy makers, faith leaders, service providers, women's and girl's organization leaders, educators, and with age-specific groupings of Black girls themselves, to bring to light some of the particular challenges faced by Black girls and to develop and common agenda strategies for addressing those challenges in varied environments.

• **PARENTS, PRINCIPALS, AND TEACHERS NEED TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT APPROACHES TO ADDRESS THE PARTICULAR NEEDS OF BLACK GIRLS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS.** Of particular concern are issues of safety, social supports, classroom engagement, and time management—all issues that pose real challenges in the lives of Black girls. In addition, high school career and guidance counselors should actively engage underprivileged Black girls about their full range of educational and career opportunities, providing them with information about nontraditional jobs, financial aid and scholarship programs, and mentorship opportunities with successful Black women professionals.

• **SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY GROUPS, AND SERVICE PROVIDERS SERVING BLACK GIRLS SHOULD INCORPORATE INFORMATION AND DISCUSSIONS ABOUT VIOLENCE, SAFETY, AND SEXUAL HEALTH INTO THEIR PROGRAMS AND CURRICULUM.** Black girls and boys should learn at an early age about how physical and sexual violence against girls and women harms entire communities and how they can protect themselves from violence and abuse. Community groups also should come together to devise ways to protect Black girls and boys and their ability to experience a safe childhood on a daily basis.

• **REACH OUT TO ADOLESCENT BLACK GIRLS ABOUT THEIR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH.** Schools, community leaders, and service providers must do more to ensure that Black girls are able to access health services. Many of the girls in this study, including many who are sexually active, have never seen a gynecologist. Screenings for STDs, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases, are critical to ensuring their health and well-being.

• **DEVELOP AFFINITY GROUPS FOR BLACK GIRLS TO PROMOTE A STRONG SENSE OF RACIAL IDENTITY THROUGHOUT THEIR DEVELOPMENTAL YEARS**. Community organizations providing rites of passage programs can provide the model for introducing girls to historical and cultural information and traditions that can help them develop a healthy sense of self even within a world that often projects unhealthy images and associations with Black womanhood. These programs should be expanded and replicated in as many communities as possible, either through community organizations, churches, or schools.

• **PUSH FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMMING THAT SUPPORTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTHY PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS.** This study identifies strong relationships between girls and their primary caregivers as a critical source of support and resilience for Black girls. Support should be widely available for parents, grandparents, step-parents, or other caregivers as well as for girls who are themselves interested in improving this critically important relationship.

- **DEVELOP AND EXPAND ONE-ON-ONE MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS.** In addition to healthy parent-child relationships, Black girls would benefit from relationships with Black women leaders in community activism, business (corporations and self-employment), politics, and other careers. One-on-one mentoring programs can provide Black girls with other positive examples of the various life paths and opportunities available to them.

- **CREATE FAITH-BASED AND BLACK GIRL ORGANIZATIONAL ALLIANCES.** This study also underlines the importance of spirituality in the lives of Black girls. Alliances should be built between faith-based organizations and Black-girl focused organizations to coordinate and develop joint initiatives for reaching out to girls in need of community support.

- **EMPHASIZE THE NEED FOR GREATER POLICY ACTION FOCUSING ON POVERTY REDUCTION.** By expanding access to adult education, up to and including access to higher education for welfare recipients, impoverished parents (especially single parents) might have a pathway to true self-sufficiency through gaining the necessary credentials and professional abilities to once and for-all leave poverty behind.

- **OPEN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR YOUNG BLACK WOMEN.** Black girls and women work hard: Black women's labor force participation rates eclipse those of women from any other racial or ethnic group. Policymakers and philanthropists should reward this hard work with expanded grant and scholarship programs for young Black women seeking to build their skills and knowledge for better employment opportunities. For those who have become mothers at a young age, assistance with housing, child care, and transportation is of paramount importance in allowing them to enroll in and complete post-secondary education.

- **PUSH FOR GREATER WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY, ACCESS TO SICK LEAVE, AND OTHER FORMS OF PAID LEAVE SO THAT FAMILIES WILL HAVE THE ABILITY TO SPEND TIME WITH THEIR CHILDREN WHEN THEY NEED THEM THE MOST.** Many of the pressures that Black girls face come about as a result of their growing up in households struggling on the economic fringe, and maintained by over-worked parents who typically put in long hours in very inflexible work environments. The trickle-down effect of this lifestyle ultimately puts increased pressure on girls who then have to take on the adult-like role of being the consistent caregiver to younger siblings as part of their after-school and/or work "second shift." In the end, these girls end up sacrificing their childhood—a fleeting chapter in their lives that can never be replaced, only to have it truncated by the burdens, responsibilities, and pressures of premature adulthood.

V. Conclusion

Black girls need and deserve the support of their communities in order to face the challenges they battle everyday in their march to adulthood. As we have seen here, with or without outside help, Black girls persevere; they, in essence, make a way out of no way, when the situation demands. But should they? Only for a finite period of time is each of us given the gift of childhood. This moment in time should serve as a period of self-discovery, growth, and development, and provide the space to make mistakes and to recover from those mistakes none the worse on the other side. But when the frivolity of childhood is lost to the burdens of everyday struggles—struggles surrounding fears of violence or sexual abuse, struggles of making ends meet at home, struggles of taking on the responsibility of caring for younger siblings or doing household work when adults are overburdened with long work-hours—we all lose. These are the burdens that snuff out the innocence of youth. The spark in the eyes of a five year-old girl, should not be dulled by the time she's fifteen. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that Black girls have the opportunity to be children, and to do so within a safe, secure, environment that values their worth and provides them the opportunity to reach their full potential. This should be our goal. And with all of the members of the village working together to make it so, this can be our reality.

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