

# Reverberations of Trauma and Marginalization When Engaging in Community-Based Research with Criminalized Young Women of Color

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## ABSTRACT

We have partnered with community stakeholders from the juvenile justice system, school system, and youth service organizations, to address the criminalization of young women of color that leads to their being pushed out of school. The aims of this research are to understand the experiences of young women of color who are no longer attending school, and investigate the crossover of influences between their online and offline social lives. To promote the engagement of CSCW researchers in addressing these complex issues, we discuss tensions we have experienced in early phases of this community-based participatory research, across four categories: gender and race, criminalization, trauma and victimization, and the ivory tower. In reflecting on our experiences, we hope to engage the CSCW community in empathic, creative, and critical discourse about how these tensions might be overcome in conducting this type of research. Research, especially relating to complex social issues, is strengthened by diversity of perspectives. But this same diversity can also cause tensions and challenges.

## Author Keywords

Social justice; racial disparities; inner-city youth; community-based participatory research

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. J.4. Social and Behavioral Sciences: Sociology; K.4.2. Social Issues

## INTRODUCTION

The school to prison pipeline of African Americans has been a topic of research showing that there are disparities in punishments based on race [1]. Of these studies, few focus on the African American female perspective and their experiences with school disciplinary systems. Ethnographic research is beginning to describe the effects of racism and criminalization on inner-city girls in the U.S. [10], which leads to their being pushed out of the school system [12,13].

The CSCW community has much to contribute to the growing discourse surrounding young women of color, their experiences and social lives. For example,

investigations of how social identities are represented and negotiated on social media could add to extant literature on the effects of media representations on racial and ethnic minorities [6]. Continuing to understand cyberbullying, sexting, and online harassment [2] are especially important endeavors for holistically addressing the discrimination, sexualization, violence, and criminalization faced by young women of color [13]. Our growing understanding of how online behavior affects offline behavior [8] can have a meaningful impact on this population.

Research questions of particular interest to our team are: How do young women of color navigate their identities, rights, and opportunities in the age of smartphone cameras, social media, and the Black Lives Matter movement? How do the online social lives of young women of color influence their relationships within their neighborhoods and schools? How could mobile and wearable behavioral interventions help young women of color understand and manage their everyday stress in their neighborhoods and schools? What is the role of online support systems in helping young women of color overcome poverty, violence, and lack of opportunities?

## BACKGROUND

Our formative work started when our research team was invited by local community members to be part of a new initiative. The release of Monique Morris' 2016 book, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, spoke to members of our community who are intimately familiar with how this phenomenon affects young women of color in Philadelphia. A network of community members united over the common goal of addressing—or pushing back—on the institutional discrimination and criminalization of young women of color. The Pushback Initiative was thus formed by community members such as a prosecutor, police officer, probation officer, legal scholar, school psychologist, and other individuals who are positioned to promote justice and the right to education in Philadelphia. The Pushback Initiative is led by, and predominantly made up of, women of color.

Our team of academic researchers complements the other members by providing perspectives from higher education, the STEM field of computing, and qualitative CSCW research. When the Initiative collectively decided that the first step should be hearing from young women themselves, we volunteered to lead a focus groups study. The aims of this first study are to contribute to the narratives of young women of color in Philadelphia [10], participate in the broader national discourse on their criminalization in schools and neighborhoods, and inform the development of interventions that can help improve their educational outcomes and quality of life.

### **TENSIONS**

During the first four months of this work, we have experienced tensions in the form of hesitation and discomfort with our research process and us as researchers. Tensions have emerged during our work with the other members of the Pushback Initiative, who, in their role as activists for the rights and protections of young women of color, are scrupulous in ensuring interactions with this population are ethical, sensitive, respectful, and trauma-informed. Despite our strong agreement on these terms and overarching goals of our collaborative work, our diverse disciplinary and personal backgrounds lead us to use slightly differing lenses, terminology, and approaches. Tensions have been caused by these differences, and also speak to broader tensions around race relations. We discuss tensions across four categories: gender and race, criminalization, trauma and victimization, and the ivory tower.

#### **Gender and Race**

Some members of the Initiative, who are women of color, most immediately displayed a protectiveness over potential research participants by expressing discomfort with the diversity of gender and race on our team. Our research team is led by a white female and an African American male, with an African American female joining shortly into the start of the project. Indeed, gender and race can create disconnect between researcher and participant when engaging with inner city youth. For example, Edward Morris [12] details his struggle to connect with high school women of color, as a white middle-aged male researcher. He suggests that it may be easier for it may be easier for a researcher of the same gender, race and age group to build to build a social bond, making it easier to collect data from the participants. On the other hand, young women of color have also expressed a preference for a researcher of the opposite gender, describing greater comfort in relating and responding to men [13].

The challenges of community-based participatory research become more pronounced when the research crosses cultures [11], but we posit that highly empathic

and ethical approaches to this research can enable diverse participation and positive cross-cultural interaction. Moving forward, we plan to pay particular attention to re-presenting versus representing. Re-presenting is defined as giving a voice to marginalized individuals and groups who are often under- represented, while representing has a patronizing quality of standing in the place of and speaking on behalf of the Other [3]. We are particularly concerned with understanding how researchers who are not women of color can re-present this population by engaging with and empowering them in meaningful ways.

#### **Criminalization**

When young women of color are pushed out of the school system, it often leads to their involvement in the criminal justice system [13]. Some may attend alternative schools as part of commitment procedures that provide alternatives to criminal prosecution or incarceration in a penal institution. Therefore, some student participants may be considered prisoners—a vulnerable population that requires additional safeguards for ethical research and institutional review board approval. Perhaps an uncommon population for HCI research, we argue that individuals considered prisoners offer a rich and valuable perspective, especially in the context of complex social issues such as poverty, discrimination, and racial disparities.

Planning research activities with incarcerated participants made logistical aspects significantly more complex. For example, providing pizza during focus groups was not possible because detention centers prohibit outside food. Instead, socks are under consideration as a potentially allowable alternative for compensation. Scheduling focus groups was also more challenging, due to structure and schedules within the detention center, as well as difficulty of getting buy-in from youth who are incarcerated.

#### **Trauma and Victimization**

In the social world of young women in the inner city, constant interaction with violence is the norm [10]. Hardened personalities are developed from a young age to combat and cope with the reality of their situation. Young women are socialized to navigate through poverty, violence, racism, and sexism all at once. Forced to survive under these circumstances, these young women develop accelerated self-sustaining and independent attitudes [13]; exhibit behaviors that are labeled as aggressive, defiant, and inappropriate [10,12,13]; and attract unfair reactions and punishments [1] that lead to a lack of trust.

We are striving to be sensitive to these young women's experiences by developing trust before seeking their buy in and participation; building rapport more gradually; considering what may be triggers for them; and building in more choice during the research process. For example,

additional steps have been added in the recruitment and consent process to ensure the young women have time to develop trust. There are also concerns that the young women could be re-victimized if they feel they are being used by individuals who will take what they want from them without consideration for their needs. Thus, consideration is being given to how our research can involve more meaningful and prolonged engagement with individual participants, and broader impact on the community. Additionally, we plan to be sensitive to the young women's difficult experiences by focusing our questions on how their communities can do more to support them, and brainstorming potential solutions that might help them feel empowered and optimistic.

### **The Ivory Tower**

While we were invited to participate in this work in order to help with the qualitative research, some community members were skeptical about our involvement as academics. In line with the stereotype of the ivory tower, our background in academia appeared to some to disqualify us from understanding the nature of the problems criminalized young women of color face. This issue may be particularly sensitive given that we will represent an institution of higher education while engaging with individuals who have been pushed out of school at a relatively young age.

Tensions also arose from discomfort with aspects of the research process. For example, during discussions within the Initiative about how to build trust and help young women feel comfortable sharing their experiences, we found resistance to mention of consent forms and other formalities due to their potential for causing discomfort or intimidation. As researchers, we found it difficult to balance these reasonable concerns with the institutional and ethical constraints to which we are bound. For example, consent forms are designed to promote the credibility of researchers who are backed by a research institution and its IRB. However, in this case their lack of cultural relevance hurts our credibility as researchers and constrains our ability to demonstrate how we can be sensitive to the needs of the population we are engaging with in this work.

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