

SAVING OUR DAUGHTERS

There's long been a national conversation about the challenging plight of our sons, but their sisters are suffering, too. Protecting Black children isn't an *either/or* proposition; it's time to think about both boys and girls. In Part 1 of a 3-part series, EBONY talks to experts and hears from the teens themselves on the State of Black Girls.

By Hilary Beard

W

HETTER DRIVEN BY THE KILLING of young men such as Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, astronomical incarceration rates, high dropout stats or the school-to-prison pipeline, the travails of Black males are garnering much-needed attention.

In February, President Barack Obama announced his My Brother's Keeper initiative, a partnership with business and philanthropic communities intended to provide support to young men of color.

But our sons' sisters—biological and in spirit—suffer silently.

Black girls experience similar systemic, structural and institutional challenges as boys; for example, 37 percent of Black girls grow up in poverty, and 57 percent of them live in single-parent families, which means they have access to fewer social and economic resources than other girls. Many attend underfunded schools. They also suffer under the assaults of negative media depictions, racial profiling enforced by security guards, teachers and surveillance cameras and the excessive discipline that impact their brothers.

Yet no cavalry has appeared on the horizon.

Most people understand less about how racism col-

lides with gender to create the obstacles and burdens Black girls uniquely face than we know about how race creates problems for males. Consequently, we often overlook, minimize or even dismiss Black girls' problems, a reality that plays out in a 100-to-1 funding advantage (roughly \$100 million versus less than \$1 million) that Black-and-Latino boy programs enjoy—measures that are necessary; it's just that girls

need our help as well.

Indeed, although some Black girls appear to be doing well, many are barely holding their heads above water. EBONY set out to explore the extent of their struggles by examining four key areas of their lives: identity development/self-esteem; health; education; and family/relationships.

"We don't often spend time thinking about how racism is experienced differently across genders," says critical-race theorist Kimberle' Crenshaw, Ph.D., a law professor at both UCLA and Columbia Law Schools. "It is different being a juvenile girl who is Black than a boy. It's different being a girl who is not White."

"Black males experience some forms of racism and discrimination differently than Black women," says Paul Butler, a professor at Georgetown Law, differences most evident in the criminal justice system. Disparities in unemployment, high school graduation and poverty rates are more modest, he adds.

"I've encountered among middle class and more affluent parents the mistaken idea that their daughters aren't struggling," says teen health and behavior expert Carla Stokes, Ph.D.

Higher socioeconomic status can insulate Black girls from some difficulties, but not all of them.

37%
of Black girls
grow up
in poverty



HER IDENTITY AND SELF-IMAGE

I think other people look at me and think, 'THERE'S JUST ANOTHER BLACK GIRL. SHE'S PROBABLY GONNA END UP IN PRISON; SHE'S GONNA END UP PREGNANT; SHE'S GONNA END UP WITH SOME DISEASE.' They see reality shows, and they think that's all I could ever be. What they don't realize is that there's so much more than that TV image. There's much more to my story, so no one should ever judge me by my cover. —MORGAN RICHARDSON, 17

OVERALL, BLACK FEMALE tweens and teens are satisfied with themselves. In the 2009 Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle (BWBG) study of 128 Black New York City adolescents, 91 percent of respondents reported that they loved themselves; 92 percent loved being a girl; and 90 percent loved being Black.

"I'm really proud of my color of skin and feel real comfortable in my body," says Nadiyah Browning of Philadelphia. "Overall, I'm really proud of who I am, and I think every girl should embrace her heritage and kinky hair."

In addition to self-acceptance, Black girls typically behave in ways

both traditionally masculine and feminine.

"Black girls can be both caring and communal, and assertive and independent," says psychologist and Black girl expert Faye Z. Belgrave, Ph.D., of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Indeed, a 2013 Girl Scout Research Institute study found that Black girls are far more likely to aspire to leadership than any other girls. Their confidence arms them to navigate a world ambivalent about their presence at best, and at worst, is hostile and perilous.

Black girls tend to have a higher and healthier self-image, particularly about their bodies, than other

79%

of R&B videos
contain sexually
suggestive images
of Black women

es”—all reflected in media such as music videos, reality TV shows, YouTube and elsewhere without a counter narrative.

“Sisters can’t work together—that is what is portrayed to the world,” says Morgan Richardson, who lives in Cheltenham, Pa. “You can’t expect them to come up with anything great because they’re gonna be too busy fighting. They can’t be given a goal to accomplish without having a big fuss over how it’s supposed to be done.”

“They fit the stereotypes White people created about Black people: trashy, ghetto, loud, disrespectful, disruptive,” says Kailey Beard of Columbus, Ohio. “I’m around a lot of strong, smart Black women. They’re not what’s portrayed in the media.”

Almost 40 percent of hip-hop/R&B videos and 79 percent of straight R&B videos contain sexually suggestive images of Black women.

“Black youth view racy media at higher rates than White youth,” says University of Michigan Professor L. Monique Ward, Ph.D., a member of the American Psychological Association’s Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.

Most studies show that sexually suggestive media cause girls to feel less satisfied with their bodies, develop lower self-esteem, become depressed, adopt very narrow and traditional attitudes about gender, take more sexual risks, experience less sexual empowerment and perform worse academically.

girls do; however, negative and stereotypical media images undermine their good feelings about themselves.

Historically, mainstream America negatively stereotyped African-American females as caretaking “mammies,” sexually promiscuous “Jezebels” and “Sapphires” who dominate and emasculate men. Today, we see contemporary versions of these same archetypes: Think insatiable “sex freaks,” materialistic “gold diggers,” high-maintenance “divas” and violent “gangsta bitch-

Morgan Richardson, a senior at Imhotep Institute Charter School in Philadelphia, says she has a strong family as her grounding.

Her Family and Relationships

My relationship with my mom has helped me become more confident because she’s a great role model. **I FEEL LIKE THE GIRLS WHO DON’T HAVE GREAT ROLE MODELS AREN’T AS CONFIDENT.** My mom and I are extremely close; I can tell her anything. That’s helped me become honest with myself, with her and with other people. She had the same struggles when she was my age.” —**NADIYAH BROWNING, 15**

RELATIONSHIPS ARE CENTRAL to a Black girl’s identity. “The worst thing, in terms of their development, is for them to be lonely and to not have relationships,” says Belgrave.

Girls in the BWBG study were close to their moms and surrounded by a village of women.

While less than one-third of Black children live in two-parent families (most live with their moms), research shows that nonresidential Black dads are significantly more likely to visit, caretake or provide in-kind child support than fathers of other races.

“Sometimes we don’t respect the importance of a male figure in a girl’s life,” says Avis A. Jones-DeWeever, Ph.D. “The issue of safety is one of them, but they [play a role] in a girl’s sense of self, her ability to discern what makes a potentially good partner and as a romantic gatekeeper.”

Regardless of whether Dad is there, “If Mama, Grandma and Auntie make it plain that they’ve got their backs and love them, it helps the girl say, ‘I’m cute, I’m intelligent, I can do it,’” says Jones-DeWeever, who is the researcher and author of the BWBG study.

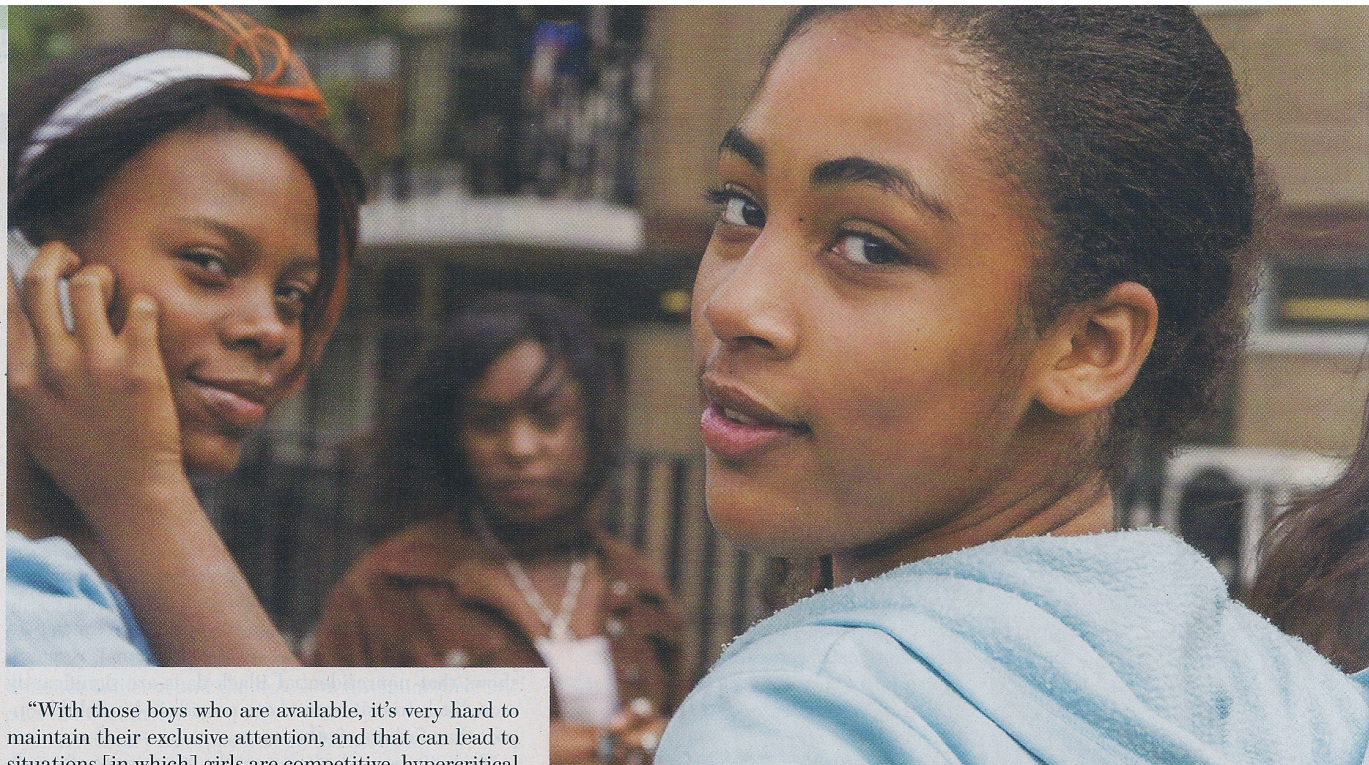
Black girls report having stronger support systems than White girls, and 41 percent attend religious services weekly; however, they do not always enjoy the sisterhood that previous generations did. The reverberations of the gender imbalance cause many to prefer friendships with males.

“As soon as one thing goes wrong, metaphorical shots get fired and people stop trusting each other,” says Beard.

HOW TO HELP HER

DURING THE CRITICAL identity-development ages of 10 through 14, help her create goals and define who she wants to be. Involve her in activities in which she can lead, serve and be exposed to positive Black women. Monitor and set rules about media use, challenge negative depictions and teach a strong sense of family history and positive feelings about being Black to protect her from internalizing the notion that White people are superior.





“With those boys who are available, it’s very hard to maintain their exclusive attention, and that can lead to situations [in which] girls are competitive, hypercritical of each other and arguments can escalate into fights,” says Jones-DeWeever.

“A lot of times, they will get into arguments about guys because they don’t know how to trust each other,” says Richardson, who attends Philadelphia’s African-centered Imhotep Institute, where students participate in sisterhood and brotherhood circles. “They haven’t connected on that level where you know this person is not going to hurt you.”

The numerical imbalance can cause girls in romantic relationships to not stand up for themselves, the BWBG study found. This is dangerous not only because of our children’s elevated HIV risk, but also because for protection, many Black girls prefer a “gangsta and a gentleman,” Stokes’ research has shown. Unfortunately, this same excessive masculinity can be associated with relationship violence, she says.

The boy shortage limits the ability of Black girls in predominately White environments to have normal adolescent experiences, such as dating and going to the prom, and it undermines their self-esteem.

“Black boys are having a moment where they are the stars of pop culture,” says Butler. “The stereotypes work in Black boys’ favor in terms of making them eligible romantic partners, but the stereotypes absolutely crush Black girls.”

HOW TO HELP HER

REGARDLESS OF WHETHER the parents get along, it’s important that she have a positive relationship with her father. Teach her that she’s valuable and deserving of love. Make sure to model the same sort of behavior.

45%
of Black girls and adolescents are overweight or obese

HER HEALTH

It’s hard to tell my friends that I play tennis because they judge me. They’re like, “How do you play? You’re such a girly girl.” I’m like, “Because it helps [me deal with problems].” And it’s fun. **ONCE YOU HIT THAT BALL, YOUR ANGER JUST GOES AWAY. I’M NOT A FIGHTER, AND I CAN’T HIT A PERSON, BUT IT MAKES ME FEEL LIKE I’M HITTING THE PERSON [WHO IS BULLYING OR TEASING ME]** My anger kind of goes away because I’m hitting something. Or it kind of helps me get my mind off the problem that’s been on my mind all day. —**DASIA HEDGEPEETH, 12**

SIMILAR TO GIRLS of other races, Black girls tend to define health in terms of their physical appearance rather than by the spiritual, physical, emotional or mental measures essential to well-being.

“The girls want to look good, so healthy to them means looking good,” says Belgrave, “but you can look very healthy and still be HIV-positive.”

This misunderstanding—and the fact that their mothers share it—undermines our girls’ self-care.

Black girls tend to eat a lower-quality diet than other girls do, including greater amounts of foods high in fat, calories, sodium and sugar.

Only 21 percent of Black adolescent girls are as physically active as experts recommend; 38 percent of 10th graders exercise daily; and

slightly more than half play a school sport. Almost 45 percent of Black girls and adolescents are overweight or obese.

Although lower-income Black girls tend to aspire to a healthy body size and are less likely to experience bulimia and anorexia than White girls, more affluent Black girls often internalize mainstream beauty standards and have body-image issues; some develop eating disorders.

Cigarette smoking, binge drinking and sex while under the influence of drugs or alcohol is less likely among Black girls than among others; however, they are more likely to smoke marijuana.

And whether on the street, at home or at school, “Black girls under 16 have the highest rates of violent victimization than any

other group," says Crenshaw. "Black girls experience sexual violence, high rates of violence while traveling to and from school, sexual harassment and being touched. Black girls who have sex are subject to bullying and being harassed at school."

Dasia Hedgepeth says she is bullied and teased in her Philadelphia neighborhood and at school.

"One big problem, no matter the income, is sexual predators and how our girls are exposed to abuse, sometimes within their own families," says DeWeever.

A report by the Black Women's Health Imperative found that 40 percent of Black girls report coercive sexual contact by age 18.

Trauma increases the risk that a child will develop learning and behavioral problems and become obese, while upping her odds of being revictimized, acquiring HIV, ending up poor, victimizing others or developing cardiovascular disease or a stress-related illness. Exposure to violence can undermine academic achievement.

In 2009, 67 percent of Black girls reported feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or more—greater than twice the national average; yet they are less likely than others to get treatment.

"When things happen to them, they're less likely to be believed or to get interventions in order

for their cases to get taken up," explains Crenshaw. "Then they get angry, act out and get expelled from school because they are acting out. Rather than people saying, 'What the hell is going on with these girls that they have these anger problems?'; nobody's asking the question."

Middle-class girls are experiencing "depression, peer pressure, stress, anxiety, wanting to fit in, and are having sex," says Stokes, who is also a teen coach.

Black girls do a better job of using condoms and getting HIV tested than White girls but they are more likely to have intercourse earlier. Unfortunately, they are coming of age within an STD epidemic, so they have the highest rates of chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis of any adolescents. Black adolescents and young women ages 13 to 29 are 11 times more likely to acquire HIV than White females. Their teen pregnancy rate has plummeted by 29 percent since 2007 but remains high.

"Something is lacking when Black mothers talk to their girls about sex," says Belgrave. "The mothers think they're communicating, but the daughters are saying, 'My mom just says, 'Don't have sex.' You have to talk about the skills they need to refuse sex, protect themselves, to negotiate a sexual encounter."



Dasia Hedgepeth (center) plays tennis to alleviate stress.

HOW TO HELP HER

KEEP HER SAFE by monitoring her friends and get to know their parents, and be aware of her activities. "Parents are not peers," asserts Belgrave. "People underestimate the importance of monitoring."

Her Education

Education is important so that your opportunities are not limited. Our ancestors fought for Black people to be able to go to school. Some people don't have the same opportunities. **I HAVE A 3.4 GPA, BUT I DON'T LIKE SCHOOL A LOT. THERE'S SO MUCH PRESSURE TO PERFORM SO YOU CAN GO TO COLLEGE** Your GPA doesn't really reflect your intelligence, but that's what colleges look at. And if you don't go to college, people kind of look down on you." — **KAILEY BEARD, 17**

BLACK GIRLS OF all socioeconomic groups hold high educational aspirations.

But our daughters' dreams often clash with their reality. A lack of family resources, failing schools and family expectations for girls to cook, clean and care for younger siblings often undermine their ability to achieve goals.

Only 20 percent of Black eighth-grade girls and 23 percent of Black 12th-grade girls test as proficient or advanced readers. In math, only 14 percent of Black girls in eighth grade and 6 percent of our seniors score proficient or above.

"My dream is to be a lawyer," says Hedgepeth. "But I don't like reading a lot, so it's hard for me to read in front of people. They say things like, 'Oh, she don't know that word.'"

Black parents are often complicit in their daughters' underperformance. Research by Ronald F. Ferguson, Ph.D., director of Harvard University's Achievement Gap Initiative, found that more than 80 percent of low-income and middle-class Black first through sixth graders in high-performing suburban districts have TVs in their bedrooms—more than twice the rate of middle-class White and Asian students. The Girl Scouts study found that one-third of Black high school girls watch three or more hours of TV on school days.

"The research suggests that Black girls are opinionated; they want to participate," says Jones-DeWeever. "Sometimes teachers tend to be more concerned with molding them into what they perceive to be the ideal of femininity: more demure, quiet and reserved."

"Black girls get expelled more than anybody except Black boys," says Crenshaw. From 2009 to 2010, 11 percent of Black girls received out-of-school suspensions—most often for defiance, being dressed inappropriately (often described as "unladylike") or physical aggression.

Being suspended or expelled even once dramatically increases her risk of dropping out—the greatest risk factor for poverty.

Being suspended or expelled even once dramatically increases her risk of dropping out—the greatest risk factor for poverty.

40%
of Black girls
report coercive
sexual contact
by age 18

HOW TO HELP HER

PROTECT HER DREAMS by having her read daily, helping her develop concrete plans to achieve her dreams and visiting her school multiple times a year, as the parents of the most successful children do. **E**