

SEE US, HEAR US.

On girlhood and growing
up Black in Lambeth



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Research Design and Data Collection

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Milk Honey Bees

Milk Honey Bees is a creative and expressive safe space for Black girls to flourish and put H.E.R (Healing, Empowerment and Resilience) first.

Through holistic 1:1 and group projects, we support Black girls' thoughts, feelings and brilliance to be truly seen, listened to, and understood in all environments within the family and community; in schools and other institutions; and society at large.

Milk Honey Bees is rooted in the creativity, celebration, and liberation of Black girlhood by amplifying the voice and visibility of Black girls in all facets of life, opening doors that are often closed to Black girls and ensuring that they are able to put both their Blackness and girlhood at the forefront, enabling them to discover not only their full potential, but also who they are.

In 2022, Milk Honey Bees published *Girlhood Unfiltered*, a ground-breaking anthology of essays, letters and creative work that aimed to authentically reflect the multifaceted experience of Black girlhood.

Juvenis

Juvenis offers bespoke support and training enabling young people who are experiencing difficulties at school, at home or in the community to turn their lives around and (re)engage with employment, education, training or personal development.

ClearView Research

ClearView Research (ClearView/CVR) is an audience insight and strategy agency, specialising in research, evaluation and engagement projects with young people and diverse communities, whose voices often go unheard. CVR are committed to inclusive and equitable practices, striving to ensure that all participants enjoy the research process and find it accessible, engaging and empowering, centering the voices of the participants throughout the research.



Ebinehita Iyere

Foreword

Researcher, Author, Therapeutic Practitioner & Founder of Milk Honey Bees

Like many of the girls you'll encounter across this report, my formative years - from primary school through to the end of secondary school - were shaped by Lambeth, where I was born and raised. As a young Black girl, I was forgotten by the local systems that were meant to safeguard and protect me.

I was not an anomaly and today, I see facets of my journey reflected in the experiences of the Black girls that I work with and advocate for. For so long, Black girls and their lived experiences have been invisibilised. Horrifying reports and coverage of the conditions faced by Black girls in Britain are painfully unsurprising to most practitioners working in this field. When tensions like these bubble under the surface - ignored by existing professionals, systems and institutions - they are left to erupt in the most destructive manner both in and beyond Lambeth.

A therapeutic approach to my research and practice has allowed me to build on dedicated work for Black girls through Milk Honey Bees, where their voices are respected, protected and visible. Together, we have built a space where they can grow, learn and shape the world that they want to be a part of. A space where their voices are firmly and indelibly foregrounded, whether through our projects, like expanding Black girlhood curricula to include the experiences of Black girls in Britain or our recently published book *Girlhood Unfiltered*. Their experiences revealed the need for further interrogation, leading to this research report.

Black girls matter because of their wholeness, not because of their experiences.

Any meaningful work into the lives of Black girls today has to centre, respect and value the insights and issues they share, such as



the negation of their innocence and vulnerability, adultification, and the way stereotypes, tropes and presumptions shape how they are perceived within public life and girlhood. *See Us, Hear Us* is important for these reasons.

To the kind, intelligent and wonderful girls who took part in this research, you may not know it today, but in your courage, you have lent your voices to girls coming up in this world after you. For each time we speak up, we protect our communities. Thank you for being you, please never doubt your power.

Thank you to Juvenis for providing the girls with the space and resources that supported their expressions. Thank you ClearView Research for supporting us with the data collection and for ensuring this research from the start was led by Black girls. Thank you, Sofia Akel, for ensuring the stories shared were unfiltered and representative of their experiences, no matter how difficult the topic. Lastly, thank you all for your continued and dedicated support of Milk Honey Bees.

For Black Girls everywhere, we see you, we hear you.

Sofia Akel

Foreword

Researcher, Writer, Creative Consultant and Cultural Historian

There are moments throughout our adulthood where we reflect on our younger years; sometimes with a fondness for the good memories, or perhaps a sadness for the things we should have never witnessed. In a society that is so deeply entrenched in systemic racism, most of us – Black women and girls – have anecdotes of the times that race punctuated moments of our childhood. For me, I can clearly recall many of these moments, going all the way back to the age of 6 or 7. I can also recall the many ways that I shaped and moulded myself to fit into the prevailing western standards of beauty, language, fashion and ‘acceptability.’ Whilst my childhood and teenage years do contain some wonderful memories, it is the ones that forced me to ‘realise’ the world prematurely that stole away my innocence and youth too soon.



I navigated schooling, friendships, community and identity as a mixed-race Black girl in predominantly white settings. Although I’d eventually find my way, the road to true liberation remains a journey that many of us are still fighting for. As adults, we have a responsibility to uplift and nurture the generations that come after us and this includes protecting Black girls.

To the incredibly brave and generous girls who took part in this research: Thank you for entrusting us with your stories. Not a single one of you should have had to experience what you have each shared throughout this research, but I thank you for your vulnerability in lending us your voice so that we may do better by you and those who come after you. Little sis, you are not alone.

Thank you Ebinehita Iyere for bringing me onto such an important piece of research; I want to thank you for also entrusting me with the responsibility of sharing the girls’ stories and experiences – it was not a role that I took lightly. Thank you for all that you do to care for Black girls; I know that you are an anchor and lifeline for many.

In dedication to Black girls – those who have come, those who have been and those who are here today.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

See Us, Hear Us sought to examine the question ‘to what extent do social, political and institutional environments impact the lives of Black girls in Lambeth.’ In this initial pilot study, this question was broken down into key research areas: community, schooling and mental health, as well as sub areas allowing for a nuanced analysis. The respondents, who at the time of research were aged between 12 and 18, were all from the London Borough of Lambeth and identified as Black girls.

The research was carried out through the framework of Black girlhood, which is essentially a lens that aims to not only understand but to also uplift the experiences of girls in their childhood.¹ Within this, the young girls are given the freedom to become the experts of their own experiences.²

Throughout the findings, Black girls reveal the key ways that their interactions with both individuals and institutions are underscored by prevailing racist stereotypes that have significant consequences on their safety, sense of belonging and freedom, mental health, and education. As this research will show, there is an urgent need for the formation of a deep understanding of the intersectional experiences of Black girls and the issues that uniquely impact them at this intersection.

Here are their stories.

Community

Our sense of community can be determined by many factors such as feelings of belonging and safety. These are typically measured against our aspirations for the collectives that we’re a part of, be it along geographical or familial lines.

Safety and Youth Spaces

The respondents view their borough through a mostly pejorative lens. Using words such as “ghetto,” “dangerous” and “unsafe” to describe Lambeth.

Within this, they identified the prevalence of homelessness, those living with addiction, and those participating in illicit behaviours. This can be linked to the lack of governmental and state interventions to protect vulnerable groups in our society who need help. As young girls, they expressed fear in cases where they have been cat-called or followed by adult men in their area who they perceive to be under the influence of drugs. The lack of state intervention to support those living in crisis can create a cycle of unsafety for all those involved to varying extents.

This has a negative impact on their freedoms with many expressing that they only feel safe at home. However, not all respondents had a haven nor could they identify any person or place in which they felt safe.

Networks of support, i.e., youth workers; Social workers; and community organisations are essential to ensuring that young girls such as this do not slip through the cracks. For many of the girls, safe community spaces such as Black women-led groups were essential in allowing them to be open, creative, safe and free to be themselves.

¹ Aria S Halliday, *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (Toronto ; Vancouver: Women’s Press, An Imprint Of Csp Books Inc, 2019). pp. 21-25

² Venus E Evans-Winters, *Teaching Black Girls : Resiliency in Urban Classrooms* (New York: P. Lang, 2005). pp. 279

“I can be myself here and it is my break away from everything. Relaxed, excited, fun.” - Nia

However, over the last decade, Lambeth has cut 64% of its youth service funding. Across the city, over 600 youth worker jobs have been axed.³ These leave young people particularly vulnerable. In the absence of safe spaces, a participant shared that she can only find refuge in fast-food restaurants such as KFC or Mcdonald's, which have, by proxy, become those places.

Without targeted funding, those who are most vulnerable are effectively abandoned by the state, meaning that the burden of care can disproportionately fall to those who care for their community, but ultimately lack the resources to create sustainable change and long-term solutions.

Girls and Youth Violence

TW: References to violence, death

A common misconception is that youth violence exclusively exists among boys and young adults. However, the reality is youth violence significantly impacts the lives of all involved, including girls: either directly or indirectly. Blinkered vision results in systematic failures to address and support those affected. Respondents described being part of physical altercations ranging from defending male relatives from police to initiating fights and defending themselves. A participant felt that the ability to fight was a prerequisite to gaining respect in her local community.

“I’m respected because of good and bad reasons because I can fight and protect myself because I try to keep out of problems.” - Ayesha

Violence reverberates across communities. Black girls find themselves adopting a maternal role in defence of boys their age. Describing the pressure to become therapists, protectors and advocates, whilst having their own trauma and needs pushed aside.

“Behind every young boy is a bunch of mums, sisters, aunties, and friends trying to keep him off the streets. This is... built so deep into our community and society: that women are just the armour that protects our boys.” – Aaliyah, 17⁴

When Black girls are not protected in the physical space, the virtual space is also impacted. In the space of several days, two viral videos of Black children experiencing brutal, physical harm went viral. These cause further harm and dehumanise the survivors whose most vulnerable moments are shared widely for our consumption.

Respondents gave two indictments on the lack of protection for Black girls:

1. Youth violence in girlhood is not taken seriously
2. Compassion remains to be seen.

Policing

TW: Stop and Search, Murder

Those surveyed unanimously revealed that they are fearful of the police. Fearful of institutional police racism that sees the continued targeting of Black people, including deaths in or following police contact.

A combination of personal lived experiences and those shared by people in their communities led the girls to feel unsafe in the presence of police officers. So much so that simply hanging out with friends is dampened with concern that they’ll be targeted by police on a presumption of guilt - regardless of whether a crime has taken place.

“They are shown to save people, but really and truly, they are just killing and making us feel unsafe.” - Vanessa

Black and minoritised young women who are at risk, including those with experience in the care system, are more likely to face criminalisation over care and support; children aged between 16 to 17 living in children’s homes are 15 times more likely

to be criminalised than other children their age.⁵

Over-policing is also prevalent for Black boys. In 2020, between March and May, the police stopped and searched 22,000 Black boys in London.⁶ This was at a time in which they were given enhanced powers of stop and search due to the coronavirus pandemic.⁷ Furthermore, since 1990, over 100 Black people have died in or following police contact.⁸

The girls are simply asking for a place in which they feel safe. From navigating their local community to policing, they have almost nowhere to turn to.

Schooling

Young people spend a large part of their formative years in compulsory education. For some, this is an enjoyable period in their lives; however, for many, including the respondents, this is a time marred by sexism, racism and stress. Most girls ranked their school experience below a 5 - indicating that it is 'horrible' – branding their schools as "racist," "boring," "sexist," "unfair," "stressful," and that you're "silenced and stereotyped."

Their dislike for school is the direct consequence of marginalisation, further adding that they feel disrespected, not offered empathy and dismissed.

Racism

TW: Racist Language

At every juncture of student life, Black students are criminalised, vilified and experience both subtle and overt racist prejudice. The participants believe that they're treated differently to white students and are disliked by their peers because they are Black.

On numerous occasions, they have detailed how racist stereotypes shape their interactions with non-Black individuals, including their teachers.

"I feel like because of my race I get misunderstood as an angry and aggressive person; I get shouted at as soon as I'm approached by a teacher or someone."

- Ayesha

A few of the girls shared instances of extreme overt racism where they were called racist and ableist slurs by their teachers.

"[A teacher] called me a 'black monkey'. When I addressed her about it, she rolled her eyes, walked off and continued to call me a n****r."

"... [a white teacher] was cussing and calling me 'special.'" – Vanessa

Adultification & Carceral Treatment of Black Girls in Schooling

From schooling to youth violence, adultification consistently underscores the experiences of the girls when navigating key institutions and wider society.

Discrimination, such as race-based oppression, can be found at the heart of adultification, where pervasive socially constructed stereotypes, conscious and unconscious biases, and other prejudices that people hold come to form the basis of interactions with children. It is here that children begin to be framed through an adult lens, which is to say that their innocence is stolen-away by those in safeguarding positions.

Most girls in the study feel the tension of being a child that is seen as an adult. They must navigate the forced adoption of identities that have been ascribed to them. On one hand, they express that they are seen as childish when conveying joy, whilst on the other hand, they are treated punitively like an adult. This is another consequence of adultification, where child-centric behaviours are met with carceral politics.

"...especially when it comes to us wearing uniform. If a white girl comes in with a..."

⁵ Alliance for Youth Justice, "Young Women Surviving the Criminal Justice System," March 2022, <https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/2/YWJP-Final-Report.pdf>. pp. 7

⁶ Jamie Grierson, "Met Carried out 22,000 Searches on Young Black Men during Lockdown," The Guardian, July 8, 2020, sec. Law, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2020/jul/08/one-in-10-of-londons-young-black-boys-stopped-by-police-in-may>.

hoodie [she does not] get into trouble, but if a Black girl wears a hoodie we will get put into isolation.” - Alana

The girls describe the hyper visible surveillance that they experience whilst in schooling, where their behaviour, code of dress and more is subject to close inspection and disproportionate sanction in comparison to their non-Black counterparts.

Some respondents share their excitement to become women as they believe that with age, they will gain autonomy over their own lives. However, this excitement stems from feelings of being unable to defend themselves or having their voices heard, clearly denoting the lack of agency and protection that they feel as young Black girls.

“Maybe because as a woman I will be able to defend myself and stand up for myself.”
- Dana

Mental Health

Young Black girls are not afforded individuality and compassion when it comes to their mental health, believing that their interactions with others are guided by assumptions and racial stereotypes as explored previously. This leads to some respondents feeling abandoned and that nobody cares or takes their mental health seriously.

“They [teachers] don’t understand how we actually feel, they make assumptions.”
– Akua

Issues such as racism, colourism and texturism were shared as contributing factors to low mental health as well as issues such as bullying, trauma and negative body image that affect the way they view themselves.

Mental Health and Schooling

Respondents draw a direct line between the way that their mental health is treated and how they are racialised. They highlight a paradoxical situation in which their behaviour is met with suspicion and wariness if they exhibit emotion whether it be positive or negative, with educators failing to see them as individual human beings. The paradox exists at the (mis)reading and (mis)understanding of Black girls leading to wilful neglect that is driven by misconceptions about them.

Strong Black Woman Girl™

The burden of the ‘strong Black woman girl’ is forced upon the participants before many have even begun puberty. They reveal two key ways that this trope has harmful consequences:

1. How society sees them
2. How they see themselves

Black girls are seldom described as soft, gentle and affectionate; however, terms such as ‘aggressive’ and ‘sassy’ are commonplace. Homogenisation leaves little room for alternatives or individuality but can quickly become the lens through which people see Black girls.

These racist stereotypes, in turn, create a false perception that Black girls are emotionless and carry no pain: only anger.

“People think that because [of] the narrative 'strong Black girl'... we don't suffer at all but really, we do: physically and mentally.” – Alana

After an extended period of time, these stereotypes have the ability to seep into the consciousness of those who it harms and those who it miseducates. A respondent details the necessity of having to perform strength as they navigate societal expectations of how they should exist as Black girls.

⁷ Gov, “Police given New Powers and Support to Respond to Coronavirus,” GOV.UK, March 26, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/police-given-new-powers-and-support-to-respond-to-coronavirus>.

Self-Care

Practising self-care is a task that is as deeply personal as the experience of mental health itself. The girls had various ‘coping’

strategies that included ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ coping mechanisms. For example, some use music and socialising as ways to create positive spaces to support their mental health. However, some turn to smoking and skipping school, which can cause bodily harm and risk their academic futures.

This is due in part to a lack of intersectional interventions created to support Black girls mental health, compounded with the belief that they are overlooked and not cared for.

Methodology

See Us, Hear Us sought to answer the following research question:

‘To what extent do social, political and institutional environments impact the lives of Black girls in Lambeth.’

This research question was broken down into research sub-groups that examined the respondents’ experiences within schooling, their community, mental health, feelings of safety and security and their relationship to themselves and others.

Research Methods

See Us, Hear Us, a pilot research study, explored the experiences of young Black girls from Lambeth: specifically those who live and/or receive education there. In this initial stage of research, 10 participants took part, all of whom identify as female girls, between the ages of 12 to 18; one of the respondents turned 18 during the course of the research, and another dropped out due to external diary clashes. However, their contributions to the research have still been included in the findings section, as this was predominantly a qualitative pilot study and every participants’ contribution is valued.

The respondents are diverse across the African and Caribbean diaspora, making up a sample group that consisted of:

Race and Ethnicity of Participants

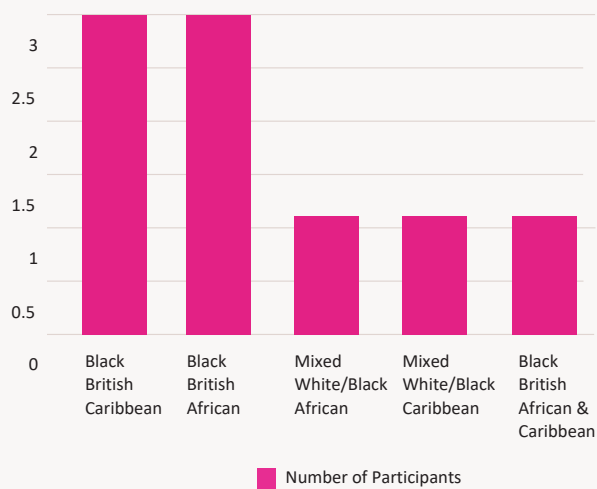


Figure 1: Race and ethnicity of participants

Ages of Participants

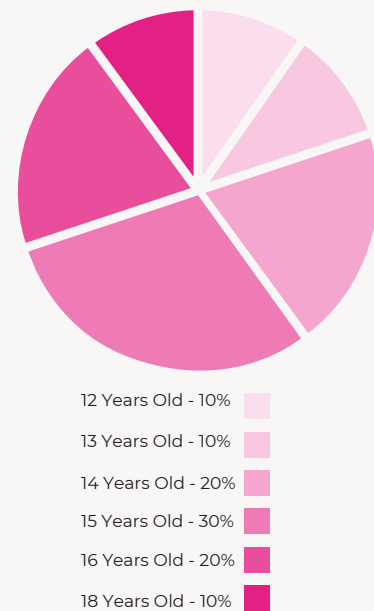


Figure 2: Ages of participants

Within this group, several respondents were either in full time secondary education, on managed moves due to exclusion or not in education or training. However, one is due to be attending a new school, though this has not yet materialised.

Educational Status of Participants

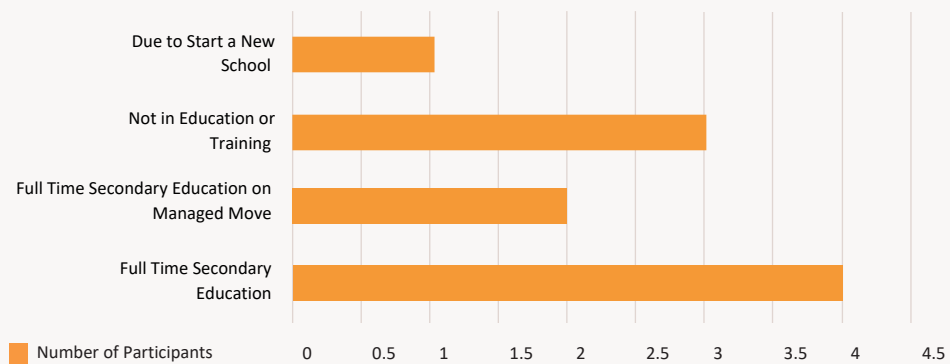


Figure 3: Educational status of participants

Data Collection

Data collection was completed by Clearview Research and Milk Honey Bees, a grassroots, community-based organisation that supports Black girls in London. It is a Black girl led safe-space that aims to allow young women and girls to feel empowered, providing them a space to heal from traumatic experiences.

A mixed methods approach to the research was taken, which consisted of a co-creation group, exploration labs and surveys. All data was gathered in Winter 2022 and published March 2023.

Co-Creation Group

The co-creation group was made up of between 4-6 young Black girls from Lambeth, aged between 12-18. This group enabled the young girls to not only participate in the research, but to guide and steer it from a strategic point of view, in so much that they are the experts and authors of their own experiences. Co-creation was an essential and purposeful component of the research as, generationally, the experiences of young people change often. Additionally, it is vital to allow them to share their insights into girlhood in a way that translated and made sense to them. Therefore, the researchers believed that taking steer from young people would strengthen the accuracy and relatability of the research, creating a more nuanced and generation-specific approach.

The girls were not, however, involved in the specific writing of the survey and focus group questions, to prevent compromising the validity of the research findings.

Exploration Labs

The exploration labs are modelled off the traditional focus group. However, they were designed to be more creative and participatory. The guiding focus group questions consisted of predominantly open-ended qualitative questions with a small number of closed and quantitative questions. This allowed the participants to share their experiences, views and ideas whilst incorporating visual and graphic methods where participants could use different mediums to respond to the focus group questions. These sessions were led by Black women researchers, Jerryanne Hagan-Tetteh (Clear View Research) and Ebinehita Iyere (Milk Honey Bees). Ebinehita is also a therapeutic youth practitioner, which was beneficial to creating a space where participants could find relatability and comfort, aiding in the collection of rich and detailed responses.

Interviews & Surveys

Interviews were run concurrently with surveys in order to provide respondents with the opportunity to write down their answers if they felt uncomfortable answering them out loud or in the presence of a facilitator. These sessions were facilitated by Jerryanne Hagan-Tetteh, a research assistant from Clear View Research, who are an externally commissioned organisation brought in for impartiality in the data collection.

The interviews provided a space for the respondents to reflect on the exploration labs with the opportunity to discuss the survey further should they wish to add to their existing answers. As the participants included children through to young adults, it was vital to provide as much flexibility as possible to make sure that the process was neither onerous or too emotionally demanding. Interviewees were given the option of having their interview in pairs or on a one-to-one basis with the facilitator. This included limiting the one-to-one interview time to 30-40 minutes, and group interviews lasting up to only an hour. In the collection of rich and detailed responses.

Ethics and Confidentiality

As most of the participants were under the age of 18 during the time of research. Consent was obtained from the parents and guardians prior to the commencement of research, including consent from the girls themselves. They were each given a £100 voucher of their choice to compensate for their participation.

Care and protection from harm remains the main priority of this research and every step was taken to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and secure. This included 1:1 support with a youth practitioner throughout the research process, including aftercare. Additionally, a 'cool down' room was created for use during the in-person elements of the data collection, so that participants could take some private time to reflect and check-in with themselves or a practitioner. This was due to the nature of the research, which asked participants to consider their experiences of mental health, policing, schooling and more that may be triggering or upsetting to discuss. All topics included were chosen on the basis of necessity, as to reduce the harm that may be created by virtue of the topics.

During the data collection process, it wasn't possible to ensure anonymity due to the small sample group. However, the presentation of data and analysis, including quotes and demographic data, has been meticulously constructed to ensure no person is identifiable. This includes the use of pseudonyms. The quotes and names have also been mixed-up, so as not to reveal an individual respondents story in full, protecting them further.

At the conclusion of this pilot research, existing data will be entirely anonymised. This is to make the data available for future research, policy creation and other related work.

Findings

Community

Our idea of what a community is can be determined by many factors, such as our cultural frameworks, our ambitions for our local area, and our care for one another. There are endless communities within communities, so how do we define such a fluid and often innately personal concept of belonging and togetherness?

When asked to consider this question, the girls shared their thoughts on belonging to a community bound by geographical borders – namely, Lambeth. Some of the key words used to describe their vision lie in the very essence of communality: “unity,” “stick[ing] together” and “coming together.”

Poignantly, a respondent details the difference between cohabitation and unity in a given area:

“My local community isn't really a community it's just people that live around the same area.” - Alana

Safety & Youth Spaces

For the majority of participants, Lambeth posed many challenges to their feelings of safety and comfortability. They used pejorative terms such as “ghetto,” “corrupted,” “dangerous,” and “unsafe” to describe their borough. The girls discuss the prevalence of homelessness, those living with addiction and those participating in illicit behaviours. However, if we delve deeper into this, what we see are the consequences of government and state failures to care and protect for its most vulnerable, thus creating a chain of unsafety in which not only the girls themselves, but those left in a state of destitution, addiction and crime are also left to navigate dangerous situations without recourse to support. In a report commissioned by Lambeth Council between 2020 and 2021, there was a decline in residents feeling safe walking around their local area during the day: dropping from 97% to 88%. This number was even lower for residents during the evening with 53% feeling safe walking around their local area at dusk. However, this may have been influenced by fears surrounding the Coronavirus Pandemic.⁹

Our sense of safety can be shaped by both physical and intangible forces such as our emotional or spiritual connection with one another. For example, we may find refuge in our friends and family as some of the girls describe, or we may feel protected in a particular physical environment. To a certain extent, the way that we view our own relative safety can be influenced by external variables such as the news, media and word of mouth. It is clear that a combination of lived and shared experiences, as well as knowledge of danger, shapes the extent to which these girls feel secure in their environments.

⁹ Lambeth Council, “State of the Borough 2022,” March 2022, <https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-08/lambeth-state-of-the-borough-report-2022.pdf> pp. 48-49.

“[Lambeth can be] scary because there are a lot of mad people out there or weird men that like to abduct children or follow girls home or just talk to you on road.” – Tolu

“The drunk homeless scary people, big men trying to move to me (eww), a lot of hazards.” - Racheal

Feeling unsafe in your local area means that for many of the girls, their world is significantly reduced. It is in your teenage years that you may typically begin to experience greater freedoms, exploring more of your area independently, creating memories with friends, and importantly, gaining a greater sense of self. It is in these years that many young people learn how to navigate and become familiar with their areas, practising safe behaviours and so on. However, in the case of our respondents, most of them only felt safe at home or in their very immediate surroundings, such as their neighbourhood.

“I feel the safest at home because it is my little corner of the world. my bed specifically.” – Alana

For one respondent in particular, safety at home was reliant on the knowledge that her mother would be present, therefore believing that “no one can hurt me when I’m [there].” To this respondent, their safe space, in a very literal sense, is the home where they feel protected from perceived threats of physical and possible psychological harm.

However, what does this mean for girls whose homes are a far cry from safe and protected spaces? Here lies the pivotal roles of youth workers, community leaders and importantly, physical community spaces for young people and adults alike: to commune in a place where they can drop their shoulders and thus, their defences.

They also share the sacredness of having individuals with whom they can rely:

“Mo because he is a young youth worker and looks out for all the young Black kids in Brixton like we are a family to him.” – Racheal

“I feel safe around them because I can trust them.” – Vanessa

Respondents are aware of several local youth engagement centres or programmes including community organisations in Lambeth, which each of them attends. Grassroots, community organisations that offer intersectional approaches to support i.e. catering to black girls, is one such example of a pivotal physical environment that provides safe haven for girls in Lambeth. A space in which they are safeguarded from both physical and psychological harm. The value that intersectional spaces can bring to the participants is abundantly evident throughout the research. With many sharing similar sentiments of being “[able] to open up about my feelings,” to “just be myself,” where “I don’t have to watch what [they’re] saying.”

In instances where there is a network of support links i.e. through youth workers, therapeutic youth practitioners, social workers and community members, vulnerable young people can be given the opportunity to be free and creative, to focus on thriving rather than

surviving their formative years: “I met Yomi through social workers and I met Shan through Yasin.” One girl describes the impact that this has had on her at the intersection of these networks and physical space.

“I can be myself here and it is my break away from everything. Relaxed, excited, fun.”

– Nia

“[I enjoy] talking to the girls or playing hide and seek.” – Jola

Between 2011/12 and 2021/22, Lambeth cut 64% of funding for youth services; the impact of which warrants further research and investigation.¹⁰ In a sample of seventeen councils in London, only one – Camden – had plans to increase spending in youth service provisions in 2021-22. Conversely, Tower Hamlets cut their services by over £1.5million.¹¹ Looking at London as a whole, 44% of the budget has been cut across the city for young people, resulting in £240 million no longer being invested by councils in young Londoners.

In terms of youth workers, boroughs have also witnessed devastating losses with more than 600 youth worker jobs axed by councils. Previously the average provision of youth workers within councils sat at 48 youth workers, this is now just 15.¹²

All in all, governmental cuts to youth services leave our society’s most vulnerable, abandoned. With many having nowhere to turn to, a consequence of more than 130 youth centres closing permanently across the city. We have seen similar cuts to vital community lifelines, such as libraries in recent times, with as many as 800 closing across the UK in the last decade.¹³

A devastating and extremely urgent reality is that without spaces such as these, young people are forced to turn to wherever it is that they may find a semblance of safety, out of the line of danger. Some of the girls shared that fast-food restaurants such as KFC or McDonalds have by proxy, become those spaces. Whereas for others, they detail having no place or person within which they can feel protected and safe.

“Not enough community centres/youth clubs for the youth to keep them [young people] off the road.” – Alana

The reality that must be faced is that in the abandonment of the state to care for those at risk, the burden of care disproportionately falls upon those without the means, financial resources, or dedicated training to step in and do the job of an entire organisation. As we’ll explore further in Girls and Youth Violence, this burden forces itself upon those who are equally vulnerable: young Black girls.

Girls and Youth Violence

TW: References to violence, knife crime, death

¹⁰ Sian Berry, “London’s Youth Service Cuts 2011-2021: A Blighted Generation” (City Hall Green, August 2021) p.7

¹¹ Ibid p.6

¹² Ibid p.2

¹³ Adele Walton, “The Quiet Disappearance of Britain’s Public Libraries,” tribunemag.co.uk, January 17, 2021, <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/01/the-quiet-disappearance-of-britains-public-libraries>.

The term ‘youth violence’ is contested for its lack of nuance, in so much that it can oversimplify a complex issue whilst not acknowledging the systemic roots of such violence. However, this report makes use of the term only to create a shorthand. The context in which it’s used, is to refer to violence that young people experience, either directly or indirectly, accounting for socio-political and economic issues that contribute to violence in communities.

Throughout the research, young black girls detail the myriad ways in which they learned to construct defences to navigate life from schooling to being part of a community. Youth violence is typically and reductively misunderstood as an issue that begins and ends with Black boys and young adults. However, the very visceral reality is that youth violence, as it pertains to young people, significantly impacts the lives of all involved, be it by extension or direct involvement. Wilful denial or blinkered vision results in systematic failures to support Black children and young adults across the board. Violence reverberates throughout communities.

“I’m respected because of good and bad reasons, because I can fight and protect myself because I try to keep out of problems. people aren’t respected if they are the cause of fights and disruption to the community.” – Ayesha

Girls describe a plethora of physical altercations that they’ve been involved in including, but not limited to: initiating fights out of choice or bystander pressure, defending male relatives from police and defending themselves from peers. The ability to be able to defend yourself, as highlighted by the participant above, is considered a prerequisite to gaining respect in their local community; thus, highlighting a tension or pressure to engage in altercations (physical and verbal).

Societal understanding of violence, where it pertains to young women, fails to acknowledge how these girls respond to traumatic experiences, including how ‘loyalty, rules and roles within their communities’ can become central aspects of youth violence.¹⁴ This must be more clearly understood.

Violence is typically viewed through an incredibly narrow lens in so much that often only those at the receiving end of direct physical assault are seen as victims. However, a nuanced understanding of violence would also consider those who are indirectly harmed such as the families, friends and communities around those involved. For example, Black girls find themselves adopting a maternal role. This is likely the consequence of societally prescribed gendered roles in which they become the therapists, protectors, advocates and ‘adults’ tasked with saving the lives of the boys in their communities. Therefore, placing a disproportionate burden of care on young girls before many have so much as reached puberty. However, it is important to understand this as a cycle of harm proliferated across communities of people, exacerbated and ignited by tremendous state failures: it is not the fault of Black children.

“A lot of the time girls’ experiences and trauma are pushed to the side, and the spotlight is on the boys when talking about youth violence... behind every young boy is a bunch of

¹⁴ Ebinehita Iyere, *Girls, Young Women and Their Unheard and Unhealed Trauma* in Keir Irwin-Rogers, Abhinay Muthoo, and Luke Billingham, “Youth Violence Commission Final Report,” 2020, <http://oro.open.ac.uk/72094/1/Youth%20Violence%20Commission%20Final%20Report%20July%202020.pdf>. pp. 73

mums, sisters, aunties, and friends trying to keep him off the streets. Whenever that young boy's house gets stormed by the police, there are mums screaming and begging to let him go. This is something that has been built so deep into our community and society: that women are just the armour that protect our boys.” – Aaliyah, 17¹⁵

As it pertains to this study, most of the respondents believe that they're not directly impacted by “gang culture” (in this context, gang culture is to be understood as organised, local crime). However, there were, of course, exceptions.

“I watch my back every day or when I'm in my area.” – Dana

In *Safety and Youth Spaces*, the necessity of intersectional approaches to youth work was highlighted almost unanimously by the respondents. In this particular context, girls describe the dearth of provisions available to help them work through trauma; some of which relates to violence ‘on road,’ and beyond. Furthermore, a participant expressed that places of youth engagement and support often lack compassion and bespoke, tailored care for Black girls living at the intersection of gendered and racial violence.

The risks that young women and girls face can often be distinct from young boys and men due to their gender identity. This includes: being at greater risk of sexual violence, domestic abuse and developing mental health issues in the latter part of their teen years.¹⁶

As patterns begin to emerge throughout the research, it is clear that this is just one of numerous examples where Black girls' voices, experiences and safety is considered of little or no importance by process of omission or otherwise.

“The community don't care about the wellbeing of Black girls because they don't take them seriously because of the history [stereotyping] of Black Girls in South London.” – Tolu

Black girls are not protected in the physical space, and this sees repercussions in the virtual world. In February 2023, in the space of one week, two disturbing and violent videos in which Black girls were victims of horrific violence went viral. One of which happened in the constituency of Lambeth and Southwark: Lambeth being a focus area of this research. One video showed an 18-year-old young adult stab and pour boiling hot water over another young person, whilst also verbally assaulting the survivor. The video, which was recorded by the perpetrator, subsequently went viral. Since then, what can only be described as a distressing and horrific event was exploited for comedic relief by some digital content creators at the expense of a Black girls' trauma. Satirical videos and commentary on the event also went viral.

While the perpetrator was also a young Black person herself, her behaviour is not one that is created in a vacuum. Violent behaviour does not emerge without foundations for this to thrive, particularly in young people.

The phrase ‘protect Black women’ has become somewhat of a salient term in recent years.

¹⁵ Aaliyah Bailey “Top Girl” in *Girlhood Unfiltered*, Ebinehita Iyere (Knights Of, 2022) p.100

¹⁶ Girls Speak, “*Pushed Out, Left Out*,” November 2022, https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/128/Girls_Speak_-_Pushed_Out_Left_Out_-_Full_Report.pdf. pp. 6

In extending this to Black girls, we must also protect them from harm. In this instance, the virality of these videos poses many additional threats to anonymity, psychological safety and healing.

Whilst the police issued a statement urging people to stop sharing the already-viral video, their official account named the specific area in which the incident took place, potentially revealing the living accommodation and housing of the survivor. Whilst it may be common practice for police to reveal the area where an arrest has been made, greater strides must be taken to protect the identities of those involved and who we consider an ‘adult.’

The second of the viral videos was taken outside of a school in Ashford, Surrey, where a young Black school girl was brutally beaten by several white girls with an audience of white school children, teachers and adults, all whom spectated unapologetically. The dehumanisation of Black girls in a racist society denies them their humanity, innocence and right to safety, as exemplified by the lack of action from bystanders. Furthermore, the survivor must now relieve this trauma as the video makes its way across every corner of the internet, becoming yet another viral attack published for our consumption.

These incidents confirmed two things previously shared by the respondents:

1. Youth violence in girlhood is not taken seriously.
2. Compassion remains to be seen.

Girlhood is a framework through which to better understand and uplift the experiences of Black girls during their formative years.¹⁷ It is within this framework that Black girls themselves can become empowered to be the protagonists of their own stories, exercising agency over their voice.¹⁸ Ultimately, seeking an intersectional understanding of how gender identity and racialisation (ascribing individuals a racial identity) interact.

Failure to respond to the specific needs of young women and girls generally, creates a further risk to their safety where systems are set up to cater predominantly to the needs of men. Certain groups of people, such as Black and minoritised women, are further excluded from accessing necessary support, which can lead to a greater risk of criminalisation ‘for their vulnerabilities.’¹⁹ This is exacerbated by structural inequalities that relate to their racialisation as well as their gender identity.

Peer on peer violence among girls and women, regardless of race, has throughout time been consistently ridiculed, dismissed and laughed at. This is undoubtedly a consequence of misogyny: discrimination specifically directed toward women. However, when it comes to Black girls, the depth of this form of violence flies under the radar, which is undoubtedly a consequence of misogynoir: discrimination specifically directed toward Black women rooted in anti-Blackness. With this, Black girls are ironically both made invisible and hypervisible. In states of victimhood, they are made invisible; in states of general existence, they are hypervisible and seen as threatening. This is evidenced by the lack of compassion and care afforded to them in moments of violence and victimhood, whereas in moments of living

¹⁷ Aria S Halliday, *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (Toronto ; Vancouver: Women’s Press, An Imprint Of Csp Books Inc, 2019). pp. 21-25

¹⁸ Venus E Evans-Winters, *Teaching Black Girls : Resiliency in Urban Classrooms* (New York: P. Lang, 2005). pp. 279

¹⁹ Alliance for Youth Justice, “Young Women Surviving the Criminal Justice System,” March 2022, <https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/2/YWJP-Final-Report.pdf>. pp. 7

freely, as we see in Schooling, they are rendered suspicious.

Policing

TW: Stop and Search, Murder

The enduring targeting and criminalisation of Black communities in England is well documented. It is one of many universal truths that Black folk learn early in life, be it through their own personal experiences with the institution of policing, or through witnessing the heavy hand of the state on their communities. For the girls in this study, all of whom are between the ages of 12 and 18, this is a very real, unanimously shared experience.

Some respondents detail the surveillance and criminalisation of even the most innocent of activities that they participate in, such as hanging out with friends in their local community. Some believe this is down to the negative stereotyping of Black youth, in which racism allows them to be seen as threats, disturbances and inherently guilty - whether or not a crime has been committed.

“They see that I'm Black and think that I'm the cause of whatever may have happened and then treat me like shit.” – Ayesha

*“They act like they don't care, and they are racist and act aggressive towards Black kids.”
– Racheal*

Black girls face a plethora of disadvantage, suspicion and stigmatisation in interacting with the criminal justice system. Furthermore, Black and minoritised young women, who are at risk, including those with experience in the care system, are more likely to face criminalisation over care and support: Children aged between 16 to 17 living in children's homes are 15 times more likely to be criminalised than other children their age. At the cusp of adulthood, those between the ages of 18 and 24 are overrepresented in the prison population, making up 22% of the overall count. Additionally, Black and mixed-race women are more than twice as likely to be arrested than their white counterparts. This reveals the constant suspicion held against Black and racially minoritised girls from childhood to adulthood.²⁰

“The police arrest people for no reason. They pick on the Black youth more when they could be just be walking down doing nothing, it gets annoying because they're obviously bored and it makes me not trust them.” – Tia

With experiences like this, it is no surprise that respondents do not feel safe, nor do they feel protected by the police. A respondent also expressed having to be on guard in their presence, especially where it pertains to the targeting of Black boys:

*“It makes me weary when they stop and search my brother or any male relative/friends.”
– Alana*

²⁰ Alliance for Youth Justice, “Young Women Surviving the Criminal Justice System,” March 2022, <https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/2/YWJP-Final-Report.pdf>, pp. 9-11

Between March and May 2020, the first year of the Coronavirus Pandemic, the metropolitan police carried out 22,000 stop and search procedures on young Black boys and men in London. According to The Guardian, this is the equivalent of more than a quarter of all Black 15-to-24-year-olds in London. Another way to look at it is that the equivalent of 30% of all young Black males in the city were stopped and searched.²¹ This was not a response by the Metropolitan Police to a sudden and inexplicable increase in crime committed by Black boys; more than 80% of searches were not taken any further. This was the result of the police being given heightened powers of enforcement during the pandemic, which started the same month that this spike began.²² This is a very stark example of an abuse of power and how this power may be weaponised against innocent young Black boys and men.

“[Police] makes me feel unsafe and unprotected” – Jola

Among these lived experiences, only one participant shared something remotely positive about the police and this was their ability to “sometimes...depending on the situation” defuse incidents. However, this is quickly caveated by the confession that “there are times where they make the situation worse.” Another respondent shared that she feels “horrified” in their presence and that they “don’t help, they make it worse.” Ultimately, what the research has revealed, is a significant lack of trust in policing, one that has led to a deeply entrenched and legitimate fear that the police may abuse their powers to the extent of killing innocent, Black lives.

“They are shown to save people but really and truly they are just killing and making us feel unsafe.” – Vanessa

Although many, if not all, of the respondents may have been too young to remember the uprisings in 2011 following the murder of Mark Duggan, the legacy of pain lives on throughout generations of Black British lives. The Black Lives Matter global uprisings in 2020 laid testament to the intergenerational fight for racial equity and justice. INQUEST, a charity that provides expertise on state related deaths, reports that at least 100 Black people have died in or following police contact in the UK since 1990.²³ It wasn’t until 2021 that a police officer was convicted of manslaughter for the first time in 30 years (although not due to a lack of deaths in police custody) after murdering Dalian Atkinson.²⁴ The girls are growing up in this socio-political environment; therefore, expressing fear of death by police can be understood.

Quite simply, Black girls are asking for “somewhere I can go that is safe, but not my home.” The words are not only heart-breaking but emblematic of the society that has failed to protect Black girls. Whether you’re 12 years old or 18 years old, you should not have to sacrifice your innocence, your childhood and your joy navigating a world in which you feel

²¹ Jamie Grierson, “Met Carried out 22,000 Searches on Young Black Men during Lockdown,” The Guardian, July 8, 2020, sec. Law, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2020/jul/08/one-in-10-of-londons-young-black-males-stopped-by-police-in-may>.

²² Gov, “Police given New Powers and Support to Respond to Coronavirus,” GOV.UK, March 26, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/police-given-new-powers-and-support-to-respond-to-coronavirus>.

²³ Correspondence with INQUEST (2020)

²⁴ “Dalian Atkinson: PC Benjamin Monk Jailed for Ex-Footballer’s Death,” BBC News, June 29, 2021, sec. Shropshire, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-shropshire-57603091>.

unsafe; where you must police the police, adopt maternal caring responsibilities, and consistently defend your right to a life without oppression.

Schooling

Young people spend a large part of their formative years in compulsory education. For some, this is an enjoyable period in their lives, where they get to explore new interests, learn more about themselves and so on. A couple of respondents shared that they enjoyed “learning and socialising with friends” and “feeling like I actually learn something when I come home.”

However, for some, school days can be some of the worst days, marred with violence, bullying, racism and the constant need to ‘survive.’ When asked to describe secondary education, the participants used the following adjectives to summarise their experiences: “racist,” “boring,” “sexist,” “unfair,” “stressful,” “[you’re] silenced and stereotyped,” “character building” and “hard and challenging.” Most responses revealed a pejorative lens through which they viewed institutionalised education. When probed further, a further 70% of respondents ranked their school experience lower than 5 out of 10, indicating in no uncertain terms that they saw school as ‘horrible.’ However, one student who originally ranked her experience a 1, later moved it to a 5 signalling that perhaps during the course of the research, her experience in school had either improved to a degree or that they had become disillusioned as 5 reflects indifference and neutrality.

A dislike for schooling appeared to be the direct consequence of marginalisation in their schools, exacerbated by the lack of respect and empathy that they are afforded by their teachers, which is further punctuated by feeling dismissed and unheard.

Racism

TW: Racist Language

The ways in which systemic and institutional racism impacts many of the core pillars of Western society are well documented. From the judicial system to healthcare, Black people in particular, fare the worst in terms of disproportionately negative outcomes such as over policing (see Policing), and high mortality rates in pregnancy and childbirth: Black women are four times as likely to die than white women.²⁵ Unfortunately, the education system is not an exception to this; rather, in many cases, it is the first introduction young people of colour have to systemic racism in Britain.

Historically, the education system in the UK operated on a hidden, but openly exercised colour bar, where Black students were systematically sent to schools for the so-called ‘educationally subnormal.’ These schools were premised on the pseudo-scientific, eugenic belief that Black people have lower levels of intelligence and can only achieve so much in their lifetime; Black people were to be consistently outflanked by their white counterparts, who under this same racist belief have the highest intelligence of all the socially-constructed races.

²⁵ Birthrights, “New MBRRACE Report Shows Black Women Still Four Times More Likely to Die in Pregnancy and Childbirth,” Birthrights, November 11, 2021, <https://www.birthrights.org.uk/2021/11/11/new-mbrrace-report-shows-black-women-still-four-times-more-likely-to-die-in-pregnancy-and-childbirth/>.

These racist ideologies can still be found today in the classroom. This can look like underpredicting grades, holding back Black students in lower sets, disproportionate academic scrutiny and so on.

“Yeah because my teachers tell me that I am not worth anything and I am just throwing away my life.” – Nia

The participants describe the racism that is endemic in their student experience. However, in looking at exam results from 2020-21, Black and white students performed similarly – achieving an average attainment of 50 and 50.2 respectively. What this may indicate is the necessity of anonymous marking in protecting Black students from further racist treatment, as GCSE examinations are not typically marked by the students’ school. Within this, Black and mixed-heritage girls were awarded higher marks compared to Black and mixed-heritage boys.²⁶

In higher education, the difference in attainment changes drastically. As recently as 2022, statistics show that in England Black undergraduate university students are 18.5% less likely to get a first/2:1 degree compared to their white counterparts.²⁷ Research has shown that this is due to anti-Black institutional racism as the biggest gaps exist among racial lines.²⁸ In comparing secondary to higher education, there is an inexplicable widening of attainment that cannot be attributed to a deficit in Black students' education capabilities.

“Because I am Black, not much white kids like me and it’s the same with teachers because they don’t look at Black kids the same as white kids.” – Tolu

In more overt cases of racism, participants shared instances where they were called racist and ableist slurs by teachers:

“My teacher called me a vile monkey.” – Alana

*“[A teacher] called me a 'black monkey,' when I addressed her about it she rolled her eyes, walked off and continued to call me a n****r.” – Vanessa*

“...[a white teacher] was cussing and calling me ‘special.’” – Vanessa

On numerous occasions throughout this research, the girls have detailed how the racist stereotype of Black girls being inherently ‘angry’ and ‘aggressive,’ have shaped their interactions with non-Black individuals including their teachers. This, in turn, creates a fundamental misunderstanding of Black girls’ emotions, modes of expression and general well-being, as the assumption of anger and aggression underscores any ‘intervention,’ which can lead to disproportionate responses.

“I feel like because of my race I get misunderstood as an angry and aggressive person, I get shouted at as soon as I’m approached by a teacher or someone.” – Ayesha

²⁶ GOV.UK, “GCSE Results (‘Attainment 8’),” Service.gov.uk, August 22, 2019, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest#by-ethnicity>.

²⁷ First degree undergraduate qualifies by country of institution, degree class and ethnic group. Figure: 3.14 in Advance HE, “Equality and Higher Education: Students Statistical Report 2022,” November 16, 2022.

²⁸ Sofia Akel, “Insider-Outsider: The Role of Race in Shaping the Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Students,” <https://www.gold.ac.uk/Media/Docs/Reports/Insider-Outsider-Report-191008.Pdf>, October 2019.

"I feel the teachers don't listen to me when I speak to them and then I get angry and then they just see me as the 'angry black girl.'" - Jola

*"It's hard to communicate with them [teachers] because of the stereotypes Black girls have."
- Tia*

The students were asked if their schools carry out any targeted programmes to tackle racism. Whilst their answers varied slightly, none could share a specific school strategy, policy, code of conduct or otherwise that was rooted in anti-racist action to target institutional racism. The only example of any school-wide initiative was a "culture and afro day." However, the girls did disclose the individual actions of a few teachers who would share "quotes [of Black influential people] every day during tutor time."

Adultification & Carceral Treatment of Black Girls in Schooling

TW: Gross misconduct against minors

From schooling to youth violence, adultification consistently underscores the experiences of Black girls when navigating key institutions and wider society. But what is Adultification?

*'...when notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children. This is determined by people and institutions who hold power over them. When adultification occurs outside of the home it is always founded within discrimination and bias. There are various definitions of adultification, all relate to a child's personal characteristics, socio-economic influences and/or lived experiences. Regardless of the context in which adultification takes place, the impact results in children's rights being either diminished or not upheld.'*²⁹

Discrimination, such as race-based oppression, can be found at the heart of adultification, whereby pervasive socially constructed stereotypes, conscious and unconscious biases and other prejudices that people hold form the basis of interactions with children and teenagers. It is here that they begin to be framed through an adult lens, which is to say that their innocence is stolen-away by those in safeguarding positions as we saw in Girls in Youth Violence. Specifically, 'when children are ascribed adult-like characteristics, they are viewed as being more responsible and culpable than their peers.'³⁰ When compounded, this creates an environment in which those charged with the protection and safeguarding of young people, relax their need to see them for who they are: vulnerable children.

In the context of Black children specifically, anti-Black racism changes the grounds upon which adultification operates, manifests and is carried out. Jahnine Davis defines this:

*'A persistent and ongoing act of dehumanisation, which explicitly impacts Black children, and influences how they are safeguarded and protected. This form of bias spans pre-birth and remains on a continuum to adulthood. Where at this juncture it becomes absorbed within the normative negative racialised experiences many Black adults encounter throughout their life course. Adultification may differ dependent on an individual's intersecting identity, such as their gender, sexuality, and dis/abilities. However, race and racism remain the central tenant in which this bias operates.'*³¹

²⁹ Jahnine Davis, "Adultification Bias within Child Protection and Safeguarding" (HM Inspectorate of Probation, June 2022) pp. 5

³⁰ Ibid pp. 7

Due to this racism, Black children are at greater risk of not having their specific and individual needs met, which in turn creates safeguarding issues. Child Q is an example of this. In 2020, a 15-year-old child was strip-searched in school by police officers who incorrectly assumed that she was carrying drugs. She was searched without another adult present and her parents were not contacted.³² In this instance, the school and police neglected to see this girl as a child who must be treated through the lens of child welfare; instead, she was treated as an adult, facing the full extent of a ‘criminal justice response.’³³

It is clear from this research that many girls in the study feel the paradox of being a child that is seen as an adult. They must navigate the forced adoption of identities that have been ascribed to them. On one hand, they reveal that they are seen as childish when expressing joy, whilst on the other hand, treated punitively like an adult. This is another consequence of adultification, where child-centric behaviours are met with carceral politics. We typically think of the latter in terms of prisons, but the system that makes up carceral politics, formal agents of social control such as police and the justice system, bleed into our education systems.

The girls describe the hyper-visible surveillance that they experience whilst in schooling, where their behaviour, code of dress and more is subject to closer inspection and disproportionate sanction in comparison to their white counterparts.

“...especially when it comes to us wearing uniform. If a white girl comes in with a hoodie [she does not] get into trouble, but if a Black girl wears a hoodie we will get put into isolation.”

- Alana

“The old headteacher threatened to get her union on me for voice recording the conversation whilst three staff stood around me whilst talking at me. I done it for evidence, protection and safety.” - Tolu

Isolation, for example, is a draconian school measure that purports to deter, discipline, and handle bad behaviour in schooling. However, much like the carceral system, it does not address the root issues or the societal structures that lead to ‘bad’ behaviour. All it effectively does is separates students from their peers: the school equivalent of solitary confinement perhaps? Additionally, and again analogous to the criminal justice system as explored in Policing, Black students in this study, for example, find themselves disproportionately facing punitive measures whereas their peers enjoy the freedom to misbehave without equal sanction.

In terms of more permanent punitive measures, school exclusions can have a detrimental impact on young people’s lives that extend way beyond adolescence. The rates of school exclusions among girls of all backgrounds have risen by 66% between 2015-2020. Black Caribbean girls in particular face exclusion at twice the rate of white British girls, whilst those with mixed-heritage i.e. white and Black Caribbean were excluded at triple the rate. Despite the pandemic resulting in lower rates of exclusions more broadly, mixed white and Black

³¹ Ibid pp. 5

³² Caroline Davies, “Child Q: Four Met Police Officers Facing Investigation over Strip-Search,” The Guardian, June 15, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jun/15/child-q-four-met-police-officers-facing-investigation-over-strip-search>.

³³ Jahnine Davis, “Adultification Bias within Child Protection and Safeguarding” (HM Inspectorate of Probation, June 2022) pp. 10

Caribbean girls still faced exclusion at three times that of their white peers.³⁴

Some respondents share their excitement to become women as they believe that with age, they will gain autonomy over their own lives; however, this excitement stems from feeling unable to defend themselves or having their voices heard. Clearly denoting the lack of agency and protection that they feel as young Black girls.

*“Maybe because as a woman I will be able to defend myself and stand up for myself.”
- Dana*

“I hope my voice will be better heard.” - Jola

“Freedom... people wouldn't be telling you what to do and how to run things and you can be your own leader.” - Racheal

Poignantly, one participant shared that they don't believe growing into adulthood would change anything as “at the end of the day we still experience the same kind of things.” No child should be experiencing the same hardships and challenges that are the preserve of the adult world. Here lies an indictment on the treatment of Black girls who are treated as adults. This will go on to have implications on their mental health in various ways.

Mental Health

Over the decades and through generations, mental health has gradually become a topic that is slowly, but surely, going through a process of de-stigmatisation. Meaning that, societally, our understanding, recognition of and openness to discuss mental health is increasing. This is great news; however, in the wake of its tracks, vulnerable members of our society still await a nuanced and empathetic understanding of their conditions and life experiences. This is the case for Black girls in this study.

Young people today are living with mental health conditions: over a quarter of young women aged 16-24 are living with depression or anxiety at 3 times the rate of their male counterparts. Young women also experience this at higher rates than older women.³⁵

Consistently throughout the research, participants have expressed the many ways that they are marginalised at the intersection of their racialisation (as Black) and their gender identity (as girls). From racism in schooling to the lack of care and action against youth violence amongst girls and teens, Black girls find themselves constantly vying for compassion and to be seen in a literal and metaphorical sense.

Respondents feel that they are not afforded the luxury of individuality; the homogenisation of Black girls means that they are not looked at in their full range as individuals with specific needs, emotions, feelings and experiences. Instead, the respondents assert that people are led by their socially ascribed assumptions of Black girls. Simply, the girls are pleading to be listened to and respected as individuals, to not be seen through the context of people's

³⁴ Girls Speak, “Pushed Out, Left Out,” November 2022, https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/128/Girls_Speak_-_Pushed_Out_Left_Out_-_Full_Report.pdf. pp. 44

³⁵ *ibid* pp. 16

limited imaginations of Black youth, and to have afforded to them their humanity.

“[Teachers] don’t understand how we actually feel [when] they make assumptions.”

– Akua

“Actually listen instead of jumping to conclusions straight away. We are not all bad people, or in gangs or trying to steal from shops.” – Dana

“Take in Black girls and what they have to say and let them speak their minds.” – Jola

Furthermore, the respondents feel that their mental health is not taken seriously and that nobody cares. This is analogous to their views shared in *Girls and Youth Violence*, where they too expressed a notable lack of care from outside forces.

When it comes to issues that impact their mental health the greatest, participants frequently share that racism, colourism and texturism lead to low mental health. The latter two, colourism and texturism, are consequences of the former. In a society built upon white supremacy, proximity to whiteness is met with greater reward whether this be through, though not limited to, preferential treatment due to the lightness of one's skin or Eurocentric appearance. Those with greater proximity to whiteness typically fare better at multiple areas and levels of society from educational outcomes in higher education to the judicial system. This very specific subset of racism that is directed toward darker-skinned Black people is especially prevalent and can be found in communities and cultures around the globe: a consequence of colonialism. This prejudice is not exclusive to white communities, but can be upheld by communities of colour as well.

“There’s no appreciation for dark skin girls.” – Nia

Additionally, the girls share issues such as bullying, trauma and negative body image as some of the issues that exacerbate their mental health. These are issues that are typically universally experienced by young people, especially young girls. So what is it about them being Black girls that makes their mental health so easily deniable or overlooked?

Mental Health and Schooling

See Schooling for more information.

Specific examples of mental health in education were offered by the girls, who draw a direct line between safeguarding and care from teachers and their race.

“I would say in school, mental health and wellbeing is not taken seriously when it comes to Black Girls.” – Dana

“In school... [Teachers] say they care but they really don’t. When you’re happy in school, it is seen as a problem because you are seen as childish and immature but when you’re sad and quiet in school, they say you are not engaging.” – Tia

A paradox exists at the (mis)reading and (mis)understanding of Black girls. The failure to see them as human beings, rather than a challenge to the classroom that must be consistently scrutinised, leads to a wilful neglect, driven by a purposeful misinterpretation of Black girls simply existing in their full spectrum of human emotion. Using Tia's experience, we can potentially see an element of confirmation bias in the teachers' reading of their students. Here, a limiting belief or stereotypical view of Black girls leads to a scenario where a teenager is seen as inherently disruptive and childish in their joy, but are accused of not engaging in their sadness. These testimonies are examples of racialised treatment in the classroom, which lead to disproportionate actions taken against Black students as explored in *Adultification and Carceral Treatment of Black Girls in Schooling*.

Furthermore, a respondent shared that in the midst of living with a mental health condition, people are likely to not take it seriously due to misconceptions about mixed-race Black girls.

"I feel like because I am Black/Mixed, people think [a mental health condition] is an act to make people take me seriously but it doesn't work." – Alana

Only one participant shared positive actions where their teacher made a concerted effort to support them with their mental health.

"I had one teacher who was my PE teacher and she used to always give me some pep talks to help me with my mental health and about how to love myself and the skin that I wake up in everyday." - Nia

Conversely, one girl revealed that it is outside of the school where she can find compassion; where someone will check up on you and "genuinely mean it," as "you can't make people care."

Strong Black Woman Girl™

A commonly used, but misunderstood stereotype of Black women is that of the 'strong, Black woman.' Commonly misunderstood as what might seem like a positive or affirming view of Black women's strength is, in actual fact, a racialised trope that can have dire consequences for those on the receiving end. Assertions such as this, subtly teach Black women that they must be strong, foregoing all else in the pursuit of that. What this has the potential to create in return, is a lack of self-care, to see one's value only through the eyes of strength, not vulnerability.

"Black Girls are expected to be warriors." – Racheal

For young Black girls, like those in this research, the burden of the 'strong Black women girl' is forced upon them before many have even begun puberty. The girls reveal two key ways this trope can have negative consequences:

1. How society sees them
2. How they see themselves

How society sees them – it is seldom that Black girls or even women are described or seen as soft, gentle and affectionate. Quite frequently, terms such as ‘aggressive,’ ‘sassy,’ and ‘confident’ are used to homogenise Black girls under one personality type, leaving no space for alternatives or individuality.

When society labels groups, such as through the media, certain stereotypes like those detailed above can become part of one’s schema, which is essentially a part of our mind that categorises information. It is here that we, without rational thought, can make snap assumptions and judgements about groups of people that lack nuance, sensitivity, or accuracy. It is in both our subconscious and conscious thinking that these judgements might reveal themselves.

Therefore, as one participant explains, when Black girls are seen only as “aggressive,” that often becomes the lens through which interactions are held. Furthermore, these tropes lend themselves to a narrative that Black girls simply do not experience trauma, or ill mental health. It lies in the expectation that Black girls are emotionless, or at the very least have a superhuman ability to carry no pain or strife.

“I feel as though because we are seen as aggressive that's all they pay attention to. The problem is never focussed on, there's less help for Black girls because we are meant to be strong.” – Tia

“People think that because the narrative 'strong Black girl' actually mean that we don't suffer at all but really we do physically and mentally.” – Alana

However, there is a very clear ocean between what the girls themselves feel and what the outside world expects of them. Only one respondent believed that you must experience trauma to earn a title such as this.

How they see themselves – stereotypes that are reproduced and proliferated over long periods of time can have the ability to seep into the consciousness of both those who the stereotype harms and those who it miseducates. For the former, one of the consequences is the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is when a stereotype becomes a belief that influences one’s behaviour to the point of it becoming true, through conscious and unconscious behaviours. For example, if a working class child is told that working class people are uneducated and never achieve high grades in school, that child may begin to believe that is true, perhaps to the extent that they subconsciously sabotage their own chances of academic success. Thus fulfilling the ‘prophecy.’

In the instance of young Black girls in this study, one details the necessity of having to perform strength as they navigate societal expectations and perceptions of who and how they should be, further highlighting the intense pressure that Black girls may feel in being true to their emotions while fulfilling society’s need to homogenise Black girls.

“Not all Black are strong both mentally and physically; they have to pretend because most Black Girls are at breaking point with expectations and what they're meant to be.” - Dana

Another important observation made by a participant is the ability for the ‘strong Black woman/girl’ trope to create an insecurity in young Black girls who may not see themselves as being able to live up to the grand, but deeply fraught stereotype, where strength and identity are seen as inextricably linked.

“[It can] make other young Black girls insecure because they don't believe that they are a strong Black girl.” - Tolu

Self-Care

Practising self-care is a task that is as deeply personal as the experience of mental health itself. For the girls in this study, they each had different and sometimes similar ways of ‘coping.’ What this research will describe as ‘positive coping mechanisms’, i.e. ways of caring for oneself that doesn’t cause harm to the self physically, mentally or societally, is demonstrated in a number of responses. Some of the respondents use tools such as music and hanging out with friends to keep them in a positive headspace:

“[Music and hanging out with friends] takes my mind off things and calms me down. Talking to a friend also helps because I don't keep it in and it helps me.” – Racheal

However, some participants share ‘negative coping mechanisms’ i.e. ways of coping that cause harm to the self physically, mentally or societally. These included smoking and skipping school. When substances are used to mask a deeper issue, such as a mental health condition, this can only provide a temporary salve. However, as the participants have expressed, when they feel that no one cares and that they have no one to turn to, it is in these easily accessible products that the girls, some as young as 12, may find comfort, albeit fleeting. Furthermore, skipping school can also have negative repercussions on their educational progress, sense of belonging and potentially, their ability to progress into further/higher education or the workplace.

A lack of provisions for Black girls’ mental health and specific, intersectional support can lead to a combination of responses from the girls that all revolve around escapism or self-medication of some kind. Black girls and women between the age of 16-24, are among the highest group of young girls and women to self-harm, but are the least likely to receive support.³⁵ Not a single participant shared that they seek counselling for example, as a form of self-care. However, some of the participants are enrolled in support programmes tailored specifically to Black girls.

Throughout this research, the need for intersectional interventions becomes abundantly urgent, as observed through the key research areas, Black girls have highlighted the lack of understanding and dearth of provisions available to them at the intersection of Blackness and girlhood: this is well exemplified in Girls and Youth Violence.

When asked what they thought could be done to protect and care for Black girls’ mental health, suggestions included having Black mentors to avoid what they believed to be judgement from white mentors, after-school clubs and events, as well as asking that people take more time to listen and truly understand them.

“Every Black girl suffering from mental health should be given a voice. Professionals in both education and healthcare should have more knowledge on MH.” - Tolu

“More projects to show Black girls that there are people out there that go through these things so grow a voice and fight for what you believe in.” – Jola

Conclusion

For young Black girls in Lambeth, particularly those in this study, childhood and adolescence is not underscored by the innocence, freedoms and enjoyment that all children should experience regardless of identity. As we move through adult life, we interact with countless agencies, institutions, and people. In our formative years, most of the aforementioned are placed in our path to provide us with education, care and other state interventions that seek to socialise and shape us into contributing citizens of our society. It is here that young people begin to piece together how they see the world around them and importantly, how they view themselves within it. From policing to schooling, community to mental health, violence to safety and all that lies in-between, Black girls are facing down centuries of racist and gendered oppression, forcing them to assume the position of young women before their time.

Innocence is replaced by presumed guilt and freedom is replaced by surveillance; Black girls who simply wish for the power to exist freely and authentically must embark on an assault course of systemic disadvantage. There are no winners; there are only those who come out with varying degrees of trauma and harm done to them by those who have been entrusted with their care.

Social, political and institutional environments impact and shape every aspect of these girls' lives.

See Us, Hear Us calls upon each of us to protect Black girls. When we fail to see and hear them, we are telling each girl that they are not important. We have the power within us to restore the childhood of young Black girls: to enable them to feel safe and empowered to express themselves. Until then, there is much work to be done.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this pilot research in addition to the expertise offered by a youth therapeutic practitioner. For this reason, they are non-exhaustive and should be taken as an initial guide.

Research

Funding for a more comprehensive, representative and comparative analysis of Black girls' experiences across London Boroughs is necessary so Milk Honey Bees can further explore, in detail, Black girls' lives. This comparative analysis should consider boroughs with a similar diverse demography as well as socio-economic makeup.

Community

Safety and Youth Spaces

Greater investment must be channelled back into youth services, including other vital community agencies that cater to society's most vulnerable. Within these, there must be multi-agency working with a robust network of care, ensuring that no young person falls between the cracks when passed from service to service.

Intersectional responses to issues that uniquely impact young Black girls, such as safe space organisations for girls where therapeutic youth work is offered, supporting them through their formative years, including therapy, mentoring and more. This includes youth clubs, community centres and other local initiatives that cater to the youth population in their respective areas; each of which should consider targeted and tailored care for young Black girls.

Young people should be at the heart of programme design within these approaches to youth work, where they are given the chance to lead and co-produce initiatives that are generational in their focus and nuanced in their delivery. This includes youth clubs programmes, after school clubs and activities and so on.

Girls and Youth Violence

Intersectional responses to youth violence that consider the unique challenges, trauma, issues and violence faced by young girls is necessary in the prevention, protection and healing of Black girls who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing youth violence either directly or indirectly. This requires further research to unpack the depth and complexities of the issues faced.

Online communities must be held to the same standard of safeguarding that we'd expect our formal institutions (schooling, policing, etc) to have. This means actively protecting Black minors. Much of the online space remains unregulated, but as individuals we can be protective digital citizens through reporting inappropriate content, not sharing digital

content that exposes minors, encouraging safer online behaviours and more.

Policing

The redistribution of resources back into the community from policing has the potential to improve crime rates and feelings of safety for local communities, where key socio-economic issues such as homelessness, violence, destitution, poverty and drug abuse can be targeted at a local level. Local interventions can provide safe spaces, care and support for societies

most vulnerable. By redirecting funds to such initiatives instead of increasing police presence, it gives grass root organisations, communities and others the opportunity to tackle key issues without punitive measures (where safe and able).

Stringent, robust and secure measures must be taken to ensure that children are treated with the correct safeguarding measures in all cases. There must be no room for error.

Schooling

Racism

Adultification & Carceral Treatment of Black Girls in Schooling

Institution-wide strategies to combat institutional racism are essential to building anti-racist practices into places of education. This has the potential to create a positive ripple-effect, ameliorating Black girls experiences with staff, students, the curriculum, mental health support and beyond. A strategy such as this must consider the multitude of ways that racism manifests in secondary and compulsory education, thus creating tailored and specific approaches to eradicating it from the respective schools and places of learning. Anti-racist strategies positively impact everyone regardless of their background, racialisation and gender.

Specialist support from external agencies can provide education institutions with interim solutions and support in the absence of embedded channels and routes for students in need. This includes therapeutic practitioners and grassroots organisations such as Milk Honey Bees, who work with young Black girls both inside and 'between' education.

Schools are not an extension of the criminal justice system. In these spaces, a great deal more needs to be done by those in positions of care and responsibility to ensure the safeguarding of young Black girls. This includes the criminalisation of Black girls' behaviour through to appearance, ensuring that policies and codes of dress do not indirectly or directly discriminate against Black girls. An example of this is uniform policies, where some schools ban specific hairstyles which discriminate against Black students and their natural hair.

Mental Health

Intersectional approaches to mental health enables those in positions of responsibility and care to access a toolkit to provide effective support for those whose multiple and varying identities face different challenges. For example, a Black girl living with disabilities may face slightly different challenges to a Black girl who does not live with disability; however, their gender identity and racialisation may mean that they shared some lived experiences. By recognising the differing needs of students of all backgrounds, schools can better serve their pupils, including but not limited to, their mental health.

Mental Health in Schooling & Self Care

Black girls are seldom afforded individuality; by homogenising them, such as through negative stereotyping that these girls are 'innately aggressive,' those who interact with the young girls fail to see an individual. This has a negative impact on their ability to express themselves freely. This is a call to all; we must dehomogenise and see people as the individuals that they are.

Investment into mental health initiatives will enable service users to access help and support with less of a wait time, which in some instances can be critical. External services can be inaccessible to young girls and women where multiple barriers may exist, such as the aforementioned waiting lists and eligibility criteria which is often judged on age and level of risk.

In places such as schools, where the care of young people is entrusted in the institutions, it is vital that resources are adequately allocated to non-curriculum related aspects of school life. The complexities of navigating schooling as a young person are compounded by the blurring of the online into offline through social media. Safeguarding, in this instance, must include the safeguarding of young people's mental health, accounting for in-school and out of school factors that may negatively impact students.

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