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## Dual Status and Adultification: Black Girls' Lives in Context

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## Dual Status and Adultification: Black Girls' Lives in Context

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## Dual Status and Adulthood: Black Girls' Lives in Context

Nearly 20 generations after the chattel slavery era, Black children in the United States continue to face a barrage of systemic oppression and compounded disadvantages. The systems designed to protect, rehabilitate, and educate children are failing Black children (Cook, 2015; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Morris, 2016; Roberts, 2022). Scholars have argued that historical racism and aftermath of slavery have resulted in the overrepresentation of Black children in youth-serving systems (Morris, 2016; Roberts, 2022). The Child Welfare System (CWS) and the Juvenile Carceral System (JCS) seek to serve and support children, albeit through different avenues and functions, to improve their overall well-being. A cursory glance at existing research shows Black adolescents are overrepresented in the CWS, JCS, and as those with dual-system involvement (i.e., adolescents who encounter both systems, usually labeled dual status, crossover, or multisystem adolescents; Simmons-Horton, 2020; TCC, 2021). In 2021, Black children made up 13% of the U.S. population yet represented 23% of children in the CWS and 32% of the children who are arrested by the JCS (Children's Bureau, 2021; NAACP, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Research focused on dual-status adolescents is a relatively new area. Previous researchers have focused on the effectiveness of program models and interventions from the perspective of professionals (e.g., Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Lutz & Stewart, 2015; TCC, 2021). Additionally, much of the research has focused on young boys (e.g., Yoon et al., 2021) or young adults with former dual-system involvement (Simmons-Horton, 2020). However, there is limited research from adolescents' perspectives, especially Black girls, and their experiences within these systems. Furthermore, researchers have failed to investigate how Black girls are often subjected to adulthood within the CWS and JCS.

Recently, scholars have begun to explore the experiences of Black girls in the CWS and JCS (Yoon et al., 2021), the adulthood (i.e., prescribing adultlike characteristics to children) of Black girls (Epstein et al., 2017), and the lives of former dual-status adolescents (Simmons-Horton, 2020). However, a lack of understanding remains about how adulthood impacts Black girls' lives in these dual systems. Thus, the purpose of this contextualization is to examine the role of adulthood in the experiences of Black girls with a dual status using two theoretical frameworks: critical race feminism (CRF) and intersectionality. To accomplish this goal, the paper begins by exploring the literature on identity development, discrimination, and bias among Black girls who have experiences in one or both systems. Next, the author discusses the consequences of crossover

or dual-status adolescents centering on Black girls' experiences—or lack thereof. Using CRF and intersectionality, the author explores how adultification may create unique experiences for dual-status Black girls that are different from their peers. Suggestions for future research, policy, and practice are provided to aid social work leaders, researchers, and legal professionals in better serving this population through an antiracist lens and further the empowerment of, and advocacy for, Black girls.

## Literature Review

### Identity Development, Bias, and Discrimination of Black Girls

Black girls represent an invisible population whose lived experiences are historically devalued and silenced. For example, the adultification of Black girls fuels the notion that Black girls are more responsible for their actions. Because of this, they often receive harsher punishments than other youth of their same age or status (Epstein et al., 2017). This form of dehumanization traces back to myths created during the period of slavery in which Black women of all ages were portrayed to be one of three women that represented Black femininity: Sapphire (the “loud” Black woman), Jezebel (the sex-crazed Black woman), and Mammy (the self-sacrificing, subordinate Black woman; Epstein et al., 2017; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017). These stereotypes have had severe implications for Black women and girls, who are often viewed as loud, aggressive, oversexualized, hypersexual, and incapable of taking care of their families, but are viewed as willing to self-sacrifice for their families and others at the same time (Epstein et al., 2017; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Leath et al., 2022; Morris, 2016). For example, Leath et al. (2022) surveyed a national population of Black women (ages 18 to 24 years) on how these stereotypes impact their identity development and sexual attitudes, and found that girls who ascribed to the Jezebel stereotype were more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors and avoid personal attachments.

Moreover, Waller et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review finding these racist and sexist stereotypes were associated with sociological barriers. Black women survivors of intimate partner violence experienced barriers to receiving and accessing the help and support needed when compared to their White counterparts. Furthermore, the concept of “colorism,” or the idea that the fairer a Black person's skin is, the closer they are to the European beauty standards placed on them, appeared to impact Black girls' identity and involvement with sexual activities. Girls who ascribed to European beauty standards and did not possess these characteristics were more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors and

have a negative view of their identities (Townsend et al., 2010). Though Black girls may have negative views of themselves based on these stereotypical portrayals of Black women and girls, research has shown these stereotypes are also held by authority figures (e.g., teachers, principals, and school resource officers) in their lives, further impacting their development and the discrimination they face.

Scholars have historically focused on how the educational system harms Black girls (Burnett et al., 2022; Jacobs, 2016; Morris, 2016; Townsend et al., 2010). Research has found Black girls have increasingly become the group that experiences the highest percentage of discipline and suspension, likely due to the adoption of zero-tolerance policies and resource officers in schools (Aldridge, 2018; Goodkind, 2019; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Morris, 2016; Stevens et al., 2011). Using a CRF framework, Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) argued that zero-tolerance policies contribute to anti-Blackness and the disparities in the discipline of Black girls' behaviors, which is different from White girls and impacts the positive racial and gender identity development of Black girls. Further, Stevens et al. (2011) argued that the prevention of delinquency for girls, especially late adolescent delinquency (ages 12-13), must include safe and supportive schools and programming. Similarly, Morris (2016) suggested the teacher-student relationship is essential in combating these disparities but has typically been implicated in the racial bias that results in disparities in suspension and discipline rates.

The U.S. Department of Education (2021) noted during the 2017–2018 academic school year, Black girls were the most notable disparity in which they were subjected to higher suspension rates. For example, Black girls represented 8.6% of the total preschool population, yet they received the highest percentage of all expulsions (7.8%) and out-of-school suspensions (9.1%; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Furthermore, Black girls in kindergarten through 12th grade represented only 7.4% of the total student enrollment, but comprised 13.3% of out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Additionally, Morris (2007) argued ideas of Black femineity appear in the differential experiences in educational treatment of Black girls when compared to Black boys, Latina girls and boys, and White girls. Morris (2016) explained that Black girls are more likely to face discipline for talking back, to be viewed as disruptive or behaving unsuitably, or to be told that their hair and clothes are inappropriate and require removal from school. Aldridge (2018) supported Morris (2007, 2016) by noting zero-tolerance policies increased the disparities of harsh punishments for Black girls due to biases and stereotypes that teachers and administrators hold about Black girls. Further, Sissoko et al. (2023)

conceptualize adultification may be associated with colorism in the JCS. They suggest school disconnection, adultification, and colorism may fuel Black girls' disproportionate legal involvement, and the perceived maturity of Black girls may increase their likelihood of being charged as an adult once involved (Sissoko et al., 2023). As such, researchers have reported Black girls tend to internalize these notions relatively quickly and come to believe they are second-class citizens who are viewed differently due to the intersection of race and gender (Burnett et al., 2022; Jacobs, 2016; Morris, 2016; Townsend et al., 2010).

The educational system is not the only youth-serving institution where Black girls are subjected to these harmful stereotypes. Research has shown that increased surveillance of Black children in school has resulted in more contact with law enforcement (Morris, 2016). Prior research shows Black children are consistently overrepresented in the CWS (Children's Bureau, 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). Thus, it is important to understand how the CWS and JCS may impact the identity development of Black girls and, specifically, how adultification impacts Black girls' lives in these dual systems.

### **Youth-Serving Systems**

Youth-serving systems have been a significant source of debate regarding their societal role. Though marketed as institutions that support and redirect children to healthy adulthood, the roles of these institutions have created systemic conditions that impact disenfranchised communities. Research has shown that mass imprisonment and state surveillance, including the CWS, has profoundly impacted Black neighborhoods. For example, Roberts (2022) reported cities with the highest rates of impoverished Black communities were the same cities with the highest rates of adult incarceration and the highest number of children involved in foster care. As adolescents are situated in such communities and foster families without any relative choice, some may find themselves in contact with the CWS, JCS, or both. Before contextualizing Black girls' dually involved experiences, it is imperative to understand the trauma of interacting with these systems for Black communities, families, and children.

### **Child Welfare System**

Since the 17th century, the CWS has acted as a facilitator of family separation of Black and African American families who have faced and experienced the consequences of family separation ever since (Rodriguez, 2021). Scholars have argued the legacy of structural racism has persisted for generations of Black families who had to endure economic hardships

and discrimination, resulting in communities lacking social capital, access to resources, and upward mobility (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Purnell, 2022). Thus, **child** welfare programs have failed to adequately support disenfranchised and impoverished communities, especially Black communities, contributing to the strain and stress resulting **from a lack of adequate resources**. **Poverty** has contributed to higher abuse, neglect, and maltreatment (Boyd, 2014; Minoff & Citrin, 2022; Roberts, 2022). Additionally, state neglect laws often indicate conditions of poverty as signs of neglect, including a lack of food, insecure housing, and inadequate medical care, prompting the removal of children from their home (Minoff & Citrin, 2022; Roberts, 2022). Finally, a consistent finding within the literature is that adolescents who are involved with the CWS are more likely to be involved with the JCS (Anyon, 2011; Cutuli et al., 2016; Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Lutz & Stewart, 2015; Watt & Kim, 2019; Yoon et al., 2021).

### ***Juvenile Carceral System***

Rising U.S. crime rates in the 1960s and 1970s, **the late 1960's** War on Crime, and the 1980's War on Drugs, changed how crime was approached and fueled mass incarceration (Hinton, 2017). Marginalized **U.S.** communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and **Latinx** communities, experienced the most significant impact of mass incarceration. The current misconception about violence residing in predominantly Black and **Latinx** communities has fueled the notion that these areas are dangerous and violent (Braga et al., 2019). As a result of misguided racist policies, historical and systematic disenfranchisement, and discrimination, lower-income neighborhoods tend to experience over-policing (Braga et al., 2019; Lee & Bubolz, 2019; Rios et al., 2020; Solis et al., 2009), contributing to the daily contact that adolescents have with law enforcement (Vera Sanchez & Adams, 2011). As such, involvement with the CWS may increase the amount of surveillance adolescents residing in such neighborhoods experience, including the surveillance of law enforcement, which can lead adolescents to involvement with the JCS (Cutuli et al., 2016). Adolescents involved with the CWS and the JCS are often referred to as dual-status adolescents.

### ***Dual-Status Adolescents***

Many terms apply to this adolescent population, including "crossover" (Baglivio et al., 2016; Ryan & Herz, 2008; Ryan et al., 2013; Simmons-Horton, 2020), "dually involved" (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Lutz & Stewart, 2015; Yoon et al., 2021), "dual-system" (TCC, 2021), "dual-status" (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Simmons-Horton, 2020), "multi-system"



(TCC, 2021), and “dually adjudicated” (Lutz & Stewart, 2015). These terms come with multiple definitions that lack consistency and agreement. Thus, the conversation might change depending on the individual research team and its use of the terms. For this paper, the author intentionally uses the Texas Children’s Commission’s (TCC, 2021) dual-status task force definition. That is, adolescents who have had contact with the CWS and JCS, either separately or concurrently (TCC, 2021).

Researchers have also proposed different pathways in which adolescents may find themselves in contact with both systems (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Simmons-Horton, 2020). Simmons-Horton (2020) offered four different pathways: (a) those with an active investigation with child welfare at the time they enter the juvenile justice system, (b) those with past involvement with child welfare before they were arrested but not at the time of arrest, (c) those involved in the juvenile justice system first and then referred to child welfare, and (d) those who have been or are currently being held in the juvenile justice system with no place to safely go upon release, resulting in a referral to child welfare. Herz and Dierkhising (2019) offered six pathways: (a) “dual contact youth-child welfare pathway” (contact with child welfare preceded juvenile system), (b) “dual contact youth-juvenile justice pathway” (contact with JCS preceded child welfare), (c) “dually involved youth-child welfare pathway—no historical child welfare case,” (d) “dually involved youth-child welfare pathway—with a historical child welfare case,” (e) “dually involved youth-juvenile justice pathway—no historical child welfare case,” and (f) “dually involved youth-juvenile justice pathway—with a historical child welfare case” (p. 123). Additionally, TCC only mentions pathways, as its definition encompasses all aforementioned pathways. It notes that the most common pathway is youth’s initial contact with the CWS (TCC, 2021). This finding was supported by Simmons-Horton (2020) and Herz and Dierkhising (2019). Despite the different pathways, the consensus is that adolescents enter one system before the other through referrals, placements, or arrests (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Simmons-Horton, 2020). Research has established involvement with the CWS as the most common initial pathway to dual status among adolescents (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Simmons-Horton, 2020; TCC, 2021).

Dual-status adolescents are found to experience (a) more environmental, systemic, and complex trauma; (b) a lack of normalcy (or opportunity to experience specific childhood experiences) and stability; (c) poor academic outcomes; stigma; and (d) mental health and substance abuse issues when compared to nondual status or single system adolescents (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Lutz & Stewart, 2015; Simmons-Horton, 2020). In their study of 10 young adults with previous dual system



involvement in Houston, Texas, Simmons-Horton (2020) found crossover adolescents in the JCS received fewer court dismissals, less home-based probation, increased recidivism, and harsher sentences compared to noncrossover adolescents who are only involved in the juvenile system. Additionally, 90% of participants ( $N = 10$ ) had at least one placement in congregate care while in foster care (Simmons-Horton, 2020). Herz and Dierkhising (2019) studied Cuyahoga County and New York City—counties with large populations of dual-status adolescents who used the crossover adolescents practice model. This model seeks to change organizational ideologies to better serve and address the disparities for crossover youth (Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2021). Herz and Dierkhising found most dual-system adolescents were (a) without housing, (b) received public assistance before they turned 18, and (c) had more involvement with adult prisons through the age of 21. Conversely, Yoon et al. (2021) noted that Black youth involved only with the JCS did not show statistically significant differences in educational outcomes compared to youth with dual-system involvement. Thus, Yoon et al. (2021) suggested the JCS may be a key driver, more so than child maltreatment, in poor academic outcomes when compared to the outcomes of CWS-only involved youth. Nonetheless, adolescents' outcomes with both systems contributed to their adversity (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Lutz & Stewart, 2015; Simmons-Horton, 2020). The research mentioned here highlights these systems' differential impacts on Black youth and the racial disparities already known within the system.

### ***What is Missing?***

The intersection of racial disparities with gender bias results in severe impositions on Black girls' lives, especially those with dual-system involvement. Few researchers have investigated how adulthood impacts Black girls' experiences in these dual systems. Recent movements, including #BlackGirlMagic and #SayHerName, have called attention to the need to prioritize Black girls' experiences, the intersection of race and gender, and the impacts of the immense discrimination they face. #SayHerName was coined by Crenshaw et al. (2015) to illuminate the police brutality Black women experience and to form a new, more gender-inclusive approach to racial justice. Similarly, #BlackGirlMagic was coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013, by which Rogers et al. (2021) explained this culturally empowering affirmation has served as a nexus for the intersection of ethnic-racial socialization and the positive identity development of Black girls. Thus, #SayHerName and #BlackGirlMagic also serve as a call to action to uplift, support, and protect Black girls and women. In its own call to action, this paper explores how adulthood may create a unique

experience for Black girls identified as dual-status and who differ from their peers. By doing so, the author hopes to provide a better understanding of how adultification and dual-system involvement may impact the identity development and discrimination that Black girls experience.

### **Experiences of Black Girls in Youth-Serving Systems** ***Adultification***

In a first-of-its-kind study on adultification, the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality found that adults viewed Black girls as needing less nurturing, less protection, and being more experienced in sex (Epstein et al., 2017). Researchers surveyed 325 adult participants to examine whether they ascribe to the adultification stereotype placed on Black girls. They found Black girls are more likely to be perceived as being older than they actually are, beginning as early as age 5, through mid-childhood (ages 5–9) and early adolescence (ages 10–14), with this phenomenon happening less and the significance decreasing and as they reach late adolescence (ages 15–19; Epstein et al., 2017). Given these findings, Epstein et al. (2017) believe this may extend into how these girls are treated within the CWS and JCS. As a result of being adultified, Black girls who come in contact with authority figures in such systems may be subjected to harsher treatment (Epstein et al., 2017). However, it is essential to note that adultification is used with different understandings and operationalizations.

Morris (2016) explained adultification as a form of age compression in which children are ascribed to adultlike characteristics and viewed as older and more mature than their current developmental stage would suggest. This perception takes form in two ways: (a) through situational socialization contexts in which children mature faster and take on responsibilities at an earlier age, such as those living in a disenfranchised community, or (b) through stereotypes in which adults perceive a child's behavior to be that of an older child (Burton, 2007; Epstein et al., 2017; Morris, 2016). This perception is especially true for Black girls whose ages often become compressed with Black women; the assumption then becomes that there is no difference between Black girls and women (Morris, 2016). Thus, it is assumed Black girls should “know better” and that they decided to take on more adult responsibilities rather than focusing on the disenfranchisement and systemic forces that place them in such a position (Morris, 2016, p. 34).

Researchers propose that adultification and dehumanization of Black girls may result in a double bind (Epstein et al., 2017; Goodkind et al., 2020; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Morris, 2016). Said another way,

Black girls are viewed as more capable of overcoming adversity because people perceive them as more adultlike than their peers with resilience or “superwoman” qualities (Goodkind et al., 2020, p. 318). Black girls become “super invisible” (Goodkind et al., 2020, p. 318) and are often silenced when they dare to say otherwise (Epstein et al., 2017; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Morris, 2016). Historical representations of Black girls and women, such as the Sapphire, Jezebel, and Mammy stereotypes and the role of colorism, lead to an expectation that they will inherently hold certain attitudes and mannerisms, thus furthering their discrimination and imposing unnecessary burdens on them (Apugo et al., 2022; Epstein et al., 2017; Goodkind et al., 2020; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Leath et al., 2022; Morris, 2007, 2016; Rogers et al., 2021; Sissoko et al., 2023; Waller et al., 2022).

Cooke and Halberstadt (2021) suggested adultification has severe consequences for Black children when combined with the concept of anger bias, as this combination leaves them at a higher risk for educational discipline and carceral involvement. This bias manifests as Black children being more likely to be rated as angry when compared to White children; however, it is impacted by perceived age too, wherein Black children being perceived as older results in a greater likelihood to be rated as angry (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021). Furthermore, Black children who are perceived as older experience unfair consequences, especially when interacting with law enforcement or authority figures (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021; Sissoko et al., 2023). Disparities are apparent for Black youth in general; however, research within the educational system has highlighted the increased discrimination Black girls face due to adultification (Epstein et al., 2017; Goodkind et al., 2020; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Sissoko et al., 2023). For example, in the 2017-2018 school year, Black girls nationally represented 7.4% of the kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade public school population. However, Black girls disproportionately overrepresented girls who received in-school suspension (11.2%), out-of-school suspension (13.3%), and expulsions (11.8%; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Similarly, Goodkind et al. (2020) found 20% of Black girls in their Pittsburgh study ( $N = 33$ ) received one or more out-of-school suspensions each year, making them three times more likely than White girls to be suspended. Interestingly, Goodkind et al. found that Black girls do not see this disparity, or misperception of age, as inequality. Instead, “without critical consciousness that counters neoliberal ideology, it is likely that they internalize stereotypes about Black girls and blame themselves for their experiences of discipline” (Goodkind et al., 2020, p. 326).

Furthermore, Morris (2016) discussed that Black girls subjected to

such **adultification stereotypes** might struggle to navigate the identity politics thrust upon them. In fact, Morris posited that society treats them this way, and girls **believe the labels placed upon them**. Moreover, when they do, adults ignore the power dynamics that affect youthful decision-making. They also miss how Black girls learn adaptive behaviors—responding to oppressive conditions defined by race, sexuality, class, and gender. Given how the discriminatory form of adultification has historically shown up in multiple systems (e.g., the CWS and JCS) and the impact it has on Black girls' identity development through internalized oppression, it is vital to understand how adultification may impact the lives of Black girls with dual system involvement.

### **Consequences**

Despite **the dearth** of research focusing exclusively on Black girls, research has shown many risks of dual status involvement for Black adolescents residing in low-income communities. For example, Fong (2019) examined child protective service reports from 1997 to 2015 in Connecticut and found children living in neighborhoods with high poverty rates, comprised predominately of Black and **Latinx** families, were three times more likely to be reported to child protective services than children **of any race** living in a low-poverty neighborhood. Black women and their children, especially those who received government support, were recipients of most **surveillance tactics (e.g., private charities, service provisions for removal of children, and mandatory reporting laws; see Minoff & Citrin, 2022)** resulting in the overrepresentation of their involvement in the child welfare **system** and **adverse outcomes for Black women and children still present** (Boyd, 2014; Minoff & Citrin, 2022; Roberts, 2022). Furthermore, under the guidance of regulations that do not clearly define neglect, Black children face higher removal rates, separation, and surveillance based on the biased decisions made by child welfare professionals (Boyd, 2014). For example, Boyd (2014) provided a comprehensive conceptual framework suggesting the disproportionality of Black adolescents in the CWS is partly due to biases in the human decision-making process. That is, the continual pattern of racial disparities is likely due to the influence of caseworkers who do not live in the community they serve, coupled with the institutional racism often embedded into the culture of agencies and false narratives of Black parents, **dating back to chattel slavery**, neglecting their children more often (Boyd, 2014; **DeGruy, 2005**). In other words, due to the lack of the CWS cultural understanding, Black families are more likely to come in contact with the system. **Similarly, Apugo et al. (2022) reviewed literature discussing Black girls' school experiences. They found the surveillance of Black girls'**

femininity in educational settings, as compared to the femineity of White girls, was often rooted in adulthood that informed the schools' negative responses to Black girls' behaviors (Apugo et al., 2022).

Given high removal and surveillance rates, it is no surprise scholars have noted Black children (a) are more likely to be removed from their homes once a report is made, (b) remain in foster care for longer, (c) are rarely reunited with their families or placed in kinship care, (d) have lower odds of being adopted, and (e) experience more placements (Anyon, 2011; Boyd, 2014; Watt & Kim, 2019). Disturbingly, using the National Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (and noting its limitations), Chaiyachati et al. (2020) found adolescents living in foster care were 42% more likely to die when compared to adolescents in the general population from 2003 to 2016. Black children had the highest mortality rate compared to their White, American Indian/Alaskan Natives, and Asian counterparts (Chaiyachati et al., 2020).

Additionally, in their systematic review of 32 articles researching outcomes of individuals formerly involved in foster care, Gypen et al. (2017) found former foster adolescents (a) are more likely to experience mental health and substance use complications, (b) have lower academic achievement, (c) earn less and struggle more in the labor market, (d) are more likely to be without housing, and (e) have limited social support. Furthermore, the continual surveillance of Black adolescents may contribute to their increased risk of involvement with law enforcement and the JCS. For example, Cutuli et al. (2016) examined multiple birth cohorts born in Chicago, Cleveland, and New York City and found 7–24% of adolescents ( $N = 49,352$ ) in the foster care system have had some involvement with the JCS. Using arrest data over 10 years in Illinois, Ryan et al. (2011) found adolescents involved with the CWS were twice as likely to be formally petitioned by the juvenile courts than those who did not have child welfare status. Unsurprisingly, the majority of adolescents represented in this group were Black (Ryan et al., 2011). Finally, Yoon et al. (2021) found Black adolescents who have more contact with CWS and JCS were more likely to have adverse educational outcomes. That is, in their examination of the educational records of 30,735 adolescents aged 10–19, adolescents who are dually involved in both systems were 2.8 times more likely to fail a grade and 4.11 times more likely to be considered chronic absentees than nonsystem-involved adolescents or only CWS involved youth (Yoon et al., 2021). Thus, one could assume Black girls were involved in the overrepresentation of Black adolescents, severely impacting their overall well-being. Cutuli et al. included the rates specific to Black girls, and Ryan et al. and Yoon et al. discussed all African American youth. Yet, none of

these studies discussed the implications for Black girls explicitly. Given data were not disaggregated, only assumptions can be made about the implications of surveillance and involvement with both systems. Black girls represent a unique position in society which requires a perspective that seeks to understand their multiple marginalizations and how the socialization of race and gender impacts their experiences in youth-serving systems that may be different from their peers; CRF and intersectionality do just that.

### **Theoretical Framing**

Theories are useful in enhancing one's conceptualization, understanding of risk factors, and development of interventions. Critical theories take this one step further by considering how cultural understanding is missing. Thus, by deepening this area of research's theoretical underpinnings, scholars might be able to further the comprehension of how youth-serving systems can lead youth, especially youth of color and Black girls, to have multisystem involvement and inform the interventions and improvements to practices that better support such populations.

### **Critical Race Feminism**

CRF and intersectionality are intentionally used to contextualize how adultification might create a unique experience for Black girls who are identified as having a dual status that is different from their peers. CRF is a theory and praxis derived from the ideas of critical race theory (CRT), critical legal studies (CLS), and feminism. As a theory, CRF examines the intersection of race, class, and gender that Women of Color experience concerning power and the legal system (Wing, 2003). As a praxis, CRF uses multidisciplinary perspectives to center women's voices and lived experiences of Women of Color and includes them in the solution-designing process (Wing, 2003). Thus, as a theory and praxis, CRF allows for the critical analysis of systems of power that use a bottom-up approach by bringing Women of Color to the table and prioritizing their voices and expertise.

Due to CRT's essential role in the foundation of CRF, it is vital to highlight the five principles of CRT briefly. They include (a) racism as ordinary, or the "colorblind" approach to law-making that ignores the realities of racism; (b) interest convergence or material determinism, in which elite Whites or working-class groups will only fight for racial justice if it is in their best interest; (c) critique of liberalism, for which liberalism becomes a legal philosophy which seeks to address inequalities rather than



inequities; (d) storytelling and counter-storytelling, that seeks to uplift the unique voices of people of color and provide them with a seat at the table when discussing issues of race; and (e) Whiteness as ultimate property, or the notion that Whites have been the primary recipient of civil rights legislation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Additionally, both CRT and CRF highlight the social construction of race. That is, racial categories are invented by society, for which they may change as it is beneficial and convenient for the dominant racial group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Wing, 2003). To illustrate the benefits of CRT in examining multisystem youth, Kolivoski (2022) conceptualized how CRT may be used to explain the experiences of African American multisystem girls (referred to as “crossover youth” in this study). Kolivoski proposes that the historical systemic fallings can be addressed by giving voice to crossover youth through counter-storytelling. They note that by using CRT, a deeper cultural understanding of the differences in communication styles can be presented. For example, the loud voluminous tone that is present in Black cultures (often not negatively) is interpreted by professionals in the CWS and JCS to be hostile and unacceptable (Kolivoski, 2022). Thus, by taking the time to examine these cultural differences through their own voices, we might be able to better support African American youth with multisystem involvement.

As such, CRT examines power dynamics and injustices in terms of historical, economic, social, and systemic perspectives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001); CRF adds the additional consideration of perspectives of Women of Color through the notion that their experiences are different from White women and men of color (Wing, 2003). By doing so, CRF considers the five principles of CRT and enhances the considerations by centering Women of Color’s experiences and voices (Wing, 2003). With CRF, Women of Color’s experiences are discussed through antiessentialism and intersectionality. Antiessentialism seeks to repair the pitfall in feminism, which lumps the voices of all women as one “essential” voice and gives dominance to White women with higher socioeconomic statuses (Wing, 2003). Instead, the lives of Women of Color may not reflect the essentialist norm. Although it is essentialist, by discussing different racial groups of Women of Color (e.g., Black women, Asian women, Latina women) experiences collectively, CRF deviates from the idea that all women have the same experiences (Wing, 2003). This paper uses CRF to examine the power dynamics within the CWS and JCS to contextualize adulthood and its impact on Black girls’ identity development and consider the recommendations proposed.

Additionally, intersectionality is used to further center the experiences of Black girls and the dynamics of the discrimination they may



experience within these systems and as a byproduct of adultification. Intersectionality is a framework that centers Black women's identities—race, gender, and class—given the discrimination and social oppression they face (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is not a single-axis approach to understanding how compounded experiences with oppression and discrimination influence the disadvantages Black women—and arguably Black girls—endure. Instead, it is a heuristic tool that seeks to alter the current academic and political discourse surrounding systems of power and social justice (Cho et al., 2013). Furthermore, when considering the multiple identities Women of Color hold, Crenshaw (1991) suggested these be accounted for when considering how they are socially constructed. In their explanation of violence against Women of Color, Crenshaw (1991) posited that current solutions and interventions proposed are inapplicable to Women of Color as they were created with only White women of higher class status in mind. Thus, one must consider how this creates an intersectional form of subordination through which the resources and ability to recover from abuse or discrimination are significantly reduced due to structural inequalities and suggest solutions to address these shortcomings. Together, CRF and intersectionality provide an opportunity to center the experiences of Black girls with a dual status, examine the role of adultification, and consider Black girl's multiple identities in the formation of solutions as a way to provide them with tangible and competent support that is different from the support their peers may need.

## Unique Experiences

### Adultification and Black Girls With a Dual Status

Morris (2016) explained that Black girls do not have the opportunity to experience childhood in the same way as their peers. Instead, Black girls become susceptible to age compression and the biased assumption that Black girlhood is intertwined with Black womanhood. This experience highlights the awareness that Black girls are not like other girls, which may change their identity development and interaction with youth-serving systems. That is, their compounding racial and gender identities create unique discrepancies in their treatment, outcomes and perceptions of themselves. Drawing from the literature, and grounded in CRF and intersectionality, it appears that adultification impacts Black girls with a dual status in three unique ways: (a) their biased treatment in youth-serving systems; (b) their awareness of the systemic injustices that make their childhood different from their peers; and (c) their ability to develop critical consciousness and foster positive identity development through

empowerment and pride despite their disenfranchisement.

### ***Biased Treatment in Youth-Serving Systems***

Though research often fails to solely center the experiences of Black girls in youth-serving systems, some studies highlight the biased treatment Black girls experience in the CWS and JCS systems. For example, Epstein et al. (2017) found that because of the adultlike perceptions ascribed to Black girls, when involved in delinquency they are more likely to be perceived as undeserving of leniency, less innocent, more threatening, and noncompliant. As a result, they are more likely to receive more punitive punishments and are three times more likely to be placed in state custody than their White counterparts (Epstein et al., 2017). Furthermore, Simmons-Horton (2020) found that dual-status female adolescents ( $N = 6$ ;  $n = 4$  African American females) had more minor status offenses and more often experienced maltreatment in congregate care than noncrossover females or crossover males. Additionally, Simmons-Horton noted that participants were aware their system involvement, especially foster care, likely played a role in the negative outcomes they experienced. This appears to also extend to the adultification of Black girls and the need to take on adult roles.

### ***Awareness of Systemic Injustices That Make Their Childhood Different From Their Peers***

In addition to negative academic performance, mental health, substance use, employment, and housing outcomes that Black girls and their peers face when holding a dual status, they are subject to the perception of adultification in their behavior. For example, Simmons-Horton quoted one participant-Patty (i.e., participant's pseudonym), 22 year old African American female-in her study as saying:

“They had placed me and my brother in the same place, so I had to be strong for him. Then later on, I started to adjust to it and my brother, he’s the one who would act out. And I was the one that was good, so it was like I can’t act out and he’s acting out. I gotta be good for one of us.” (Simmons-Horton, 2020, p. 590)

The belief that Patty had to “be good” so she would not get into trouble and could support her brother lends itself to the idea proposed by Morris (2016) in which Black girls decide for themselves to take on adult responsibilities. If this is the case, Patty may have fueled the idea that adults hold regarding Black girls as being more responsible, resilient to adversities,

and knowing better (Morris, 2016). Thus, she became a “superwoman”. However, the lack of systemic support placed this young girl in a position where her childhood was robbed and her development sped up. Despite the numerous structural barriers and societal stigmatization, researchers have found that Black girls typically find strength from their intersecting identities (Burnett et al., 2022; Jacobs, 2016; Morris, 2016; Townsend et al., 2010).

***Ability to Develop Critical Consciousness and Foster Positive Identity Development Through Empowerment and Pride Despite Their Disenfranchisement***

Burnett et al. (2022) reported that Black girls in their study ( $N = 12$ ) were proud to be Black and of their physical attributes, along with feeling confident in how they handle instances of racial discrimination through conversations with their parents and connection to their culture. Similarly, Goodkind et al. (2020) investigated how the Black Girls Advocacy and Leadership Alliance (BGALA) empowerment program model helps increase Black girls’ resilience through a sense of agency and the ability to change systems of power. Specifically, through critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action, this program relies on intersectionality to help girls learn how to navigate their multiple marginalized identities (Goodkind et al., 2020). They found that the girls had learned helplessness due to neoliberal ideology, such as a colorblind approach to education and school discipline, making them feel like they cannot change the system (Goodkind et al., 2020). However, by raising the girls’ critical consciousness (i.e., engaging in critical analysis of social conditions, developing political efficacy, and participating in collective action), they question neoliberal ideologies, support collective action, empower other Black girls, and have positive feelings about their identity (Goodkind et al., 2020). Similarly, Rogers et al. (2021) investigated how #BlackGirlMagic and ethnic-racial socialization support Black girls in an all-girls high school identity development. Their results revealed that being in a majority Black/African American all-girls high school supported the identity development of Black girls as they found empowerment through the support of their peers (Rogers et al., 2021). Models such as BGALA and #BlackGirlMagic, acting as an agent of socialization, align themselves with the goals of CRF and intersectionality by centering the lives and experiences of Black girls, questioning the current power dynamics, and empowering Black girls to embrace their unique identity to support themselves and fellow sisters.

Black girls with a dual status and the role of adultification provide a new vantage point that may help to support all Black girls and disrupt the systemic violence that continues to impact Black women. As a result of

systemic racism, stereotypes of Black femininity, and sexism, Black women are subjected to discrimination, creating negative outcomes. Involvement with CWS is not limited to just Black girls; Roberts (2022) argued that Black girls' children are often weaponized against them and used as threats, dating back to slavery. Enslaved Black women were subjected to sexual assault for the purpose of having more enslaved children for labor; often, their children were used as hostages to prevent them from running away and keep them obedient (Roberts, 2022). Furthermore, the ideas of Black femininity (i.e., Sapphire, Mammy, and Jezebel) and identity politics that surfaced around the same time continue to show a presence in Black women's lives. Harris-Perry (2014) explained that although the hypersexuality of Black women is rooted in White Supremacy and slavery, modern-day presentations of Black women in the media further the identity stereotype. For example, Leath *et al.* (2021) interviewed 50 Black women in college to determine the extent to which the Jezebel stereotype, or hypersexual Black women, plays a role in shaping their sexual encounters. They found those who viewed this stereotype negatively were often more conservative and modest in their clothing and sexual activities (Leath *et al.*, 2021).

Additionally, participants noted that due to the dehumanizing media depictions that sexualize Black women, they felt they were more likely to be objectified, face the risk of sexual assault, and were often not believed when instances of sexual assault occurred (Leath *et al.*, 2021). However, Leath *et al.* (2022) noted that when Black women in college ( $N = 65$ ) were able to develop a better understanding of critical consciousness, it informed their activism and allowed them to develop a strong sense of self, community, and sisterhood, thus potentially altering the impact of harmful stereotypical representations of Black femininity. In addition to concerns around the dehumanization of Black women, they also face a myriad of mental health outcomes due to their everyday encounters with intersectional discrimination. Schulz *et al.* (2006) found that discrimination negatively impacted Black women's mental health, regardless of age, income, or education.

Furthermore, Walton (2022) found middle-class Black women aged 30 to 45 experienced depression due to what she termed as "living in between" (p. 158). That is, navigating the intersectional space between White culture, given their socioeconomic status, and Black culture, in addition to discrimination in such spaces, resulted in depression for participants (Walton, 2022). However, Black women in the aforementioned studies found strength in their identity and counternarratives, allowing them to develop self-love and healthy coping skills (Harris-Perry, 2014; Leath *et*

al., 2021; Schulz et al., 2006; Walton, 2022). Thus, Black women continue to overcome discrimination and its harmful impact, similar to Black girls. Thus, Black girls with a dual status, who may be adultified, are subjected to some of the same experiences as Black women. Centering Black women's experiences and encounters with intersectional discrimination in approaches to research, policy, and practice can offer an opportunity to support Black girls with a dual status in navigating systemic racism through engagement, empowerment, and positive identity development.

## **Recommendations**

### **Future Research**

Despite a large amount of research regarding the experiences of adolescents within the CWS and the JCS, less research exists regarding adolescents involved with both systems. Furthermore, even less research exists on the experiences of Black girls with dual status. To the author's knowledge, researchers have not examined the role adultification plays for Black girls' experiences in the CWS, JCS, and those with dual status. CRF calls on researchers and scholars to understand the antiessentialism of Black girls' experiences and to provide interventions that recognize their unique needs (Wing, 2003). Doucet (2021) used CRT to suggest an antiracist approach to research that effectively centers the lived experiences of communities and coproduce research. Doucet proposed research–practice partnerships through which collaborations with practitioners present an opportunity to create more equity, shared knowledge, and identify gaps within the system to address systemic injustices. Furthermore, researchers can counter traditional deficit models by using CRF or critical race framework (Doucet, 2021). Doucet noted JCS is one system that may benefit from a shift to a less deficit-focused and more strengths-based narrative. Therefore, future research should investigate the role of adultification in Black girls in the CWS, JCS, and Black girls with dual status from a critical race and antiracist lens that seeks to center the experiences of Black girls using a strengths-based framework. By focusing on the adultification of Black girls and collaborating with them in the process, they may feel empowered to continue to share their experiences and advocate for change. Findings may reveal new insights and interventions directly from those who are meant to receive them while presenting a counternarrative and uplifting often silenced and invisible Black girls' voices. As the United States continues to reckon with its racist and oppressive systems, antiracist researchers have the opportunity to influence policy (Doucet, 2021).

## Policy

Similar to researchers centering on the voice of Black girls, policymakers must also consider the perspectives and needs of Black girls in the decision-making process and consider their needs, which are different from their peers, when creating policy. **The Texas Children's Commission (TCC, 2021)** stated that it is vital for system stakeholders to work collaboratively toward supporting youth and their families. Stakeholders include legal and agency professionals, community advocates, young adults and parents with lived experience, and volunteers (TCC, 2021). Contributions from all stakeholders allow for better practices, greater consistency, and more equitable environments to inform policy and practice (TCC, 2021). Additionally, Brown (2013) proposed a theory on Black girlhood that is assets-based and focuses on Black girls' creativity, agency, and resistance. They suggest Black girls are a wealth of knowledge regarding their personal experiences, so when they are present in decision-making conversations, they can best articulate their needs (Brown, 2013). CRF and CRT would support elevating the voices of those most deeply impacted by way of their narratives and counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Wing, 2003). Furthermore, to address the largely adult-centered policies, it is recommended that any future legislation or amendments be **youth-centered**. Although unconventional, **the author** suggests legislators spend more time with Black girls who may be impacted by the policies being implemented and seek to listen to their needs and actively involve them in the creation of solutions.

## Practice

Dual-status adolescents have an increased presence of authority figures involved in their lives. It is critical for practitioners, case workers, court personnel, and law enforcement to understand their role in developing Black girls' identities and future outcomes. Therefore, it is proposed that professionals consider the intersecting identities of Black girls and the trauma they experience in **youth-serving** systems and seek multisystem collaboration in supporting adolescents. This point is especially important for Black girls and all youth with dual status. For example, the TCC (2021) task force highlighted the lack of communication and multisystem coordination in Texas, whose courts operate independently, meaning adolescents and families receive different court-appointed representation for juvenile and family court, respectively. Furthermore, state agencies in both systems do not communicate and collaborate (TCC, 2021). This note



is important, as adolescents and their families may struggle to navigate the complex legal system, especially when involved with two different systems. Thus, some researchers recommend a “one family, one judge” court model (TCC, 2021, p. 22). When children become involved with both systems, they see only one judge for their CWS and JCS court hearings. This model would include the same legal representative and advocate for adolescents with dual system involvement, thereby simplifying the process and establishing advocates with a more holistic understanding of each adolescent’s case (TCC, 2021). Researchers have also recommended linking administrative data (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019) and practice models (Lutz & Stewart, 2015) to improve collaboration and outcomes for adolescents who have touched both systems. Therefore, the author suggests that this model be implemented across the nation. Further, Quinn and Grumbach (2015) suggest that practitioners should understand the principles of CRT, which may allow them to better understand why clients of color may have difficulty connecting with them and how racism impacts their clients’ experiences and identities. Similarly, Dettlaff et al. (2023) called for a revision of social workers’ roles in challenging injustices by understanding how social work has maintained the carceral state, leading to racial disparities and injustice throughout the profession’s development. Thus, Dettlaff et al. (2023) stated: “As social workers, we should all aspire to a society where children are free to thrive in healthy environments free from racism and violence. However, we have become stuck in responding to children’s needs and vulnerabilities in ways that often perpetuate negative consequences, particularly for Black children. We should collectively aspire to do more.” (p. 7)

This author agrees and believes using critical theories may allow social workers to find the aspiration to do more. In addition, the author adds that there should be a focus on ethnic identity development and connection, especially for Black girls who may be removed from their communities and culture when involved with the CWS and JCS. Townsend et al. (2010) found that by enhancing adolescents’ connections to their identities and roots, they were shown to have an increase in academic outcomes and reduce their risk of sexual behavior.

### **Conclusion**

Black girls are known to be “superwomen,” which may negatively impact the support they receive when they are involved with youth-serving systems. Although a negative stereotype associated with adultification, Black girls clearly possess an extraordinary power that allows them to move through this inequitable world with heart, soul, and magic unique to



them. Research has shown that Black girls face many disparities and challenges (Cook, 2015; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Morris, 2016; Roberts, 2022). Research has also shown that Black girls can overcome these disparities and find strength in their identities (Brown, 2013; Goodkind et al., 2020). Engaging in research and policy practices that take on an antiracist lens and seek to empower Black girls are essential in sustaining equitable practices and seeking social justice. CRF and intersectionality allow for the uplifting of these positive experiences and encourage Black girls to embrace their unique positions and identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Wing, 2003). Thus, researchers who use such frameworks or engage in participatory action research or research–practice partnerships, as Doucet (2021) suggested, are better positioned to advocate for Black girls' needs, as they were directly involved in the process. As Black girls are often left to advocate for their own needs, it is essential that authority figures and adults in their lives—including scholars who study Black girls—continue to amplify their voices, provide them with a platform to share their stories, and suggest innovative ways to further empower them and promote healthy identity development. Future research, policy, and practice must consider the experience of Black girls and how it differs from that of their peers. As Black girls and women have been foundational to the creation of this country, it must protect and empower them to reach their highest potential.

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