



# INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

RESEARCH BRIEF | December 2020

## Empowering Black Girls for Critical Consciousness and Action

### WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

In U.S. society, Black girls experience a double bind. Experiences of oppression can be harmful to individuals' physical health. However, when they resist oppression, Black girls are frequently labeled defiant or delinquent and experience disciplinary consequences. Empowerment programming presents a potential means for Black girls to escape this double bind, by channeling their justified resistance to oppression into collective action to address societal inequities and thus helping to develop their collective resilience. This study was designed to assess the effects of an empowerment program for Black girls developed out of a community-academic partnership between Gwen's Girls, Inc., an agency dedicated to providing gender- and culturally-responsive programming and support for Black girls, and University of Pittsburgh and Point Park University researchers.

### KEY CONCEPTS

- *Critical consciousness* is the process by which marginalized people critically analyze their social conditions – recognizing their oppression as the result of systemic injustice rather than individual failings – and collectively act for change.
- *Neoliberal ideology* is the set of beliefs that suggest that we are each solely and individually responsible for our fates.
- *Black feminism* recognizes that race and gender oppression cannot be separated in the lives of Black girls and supports the development of gendered racial identity.

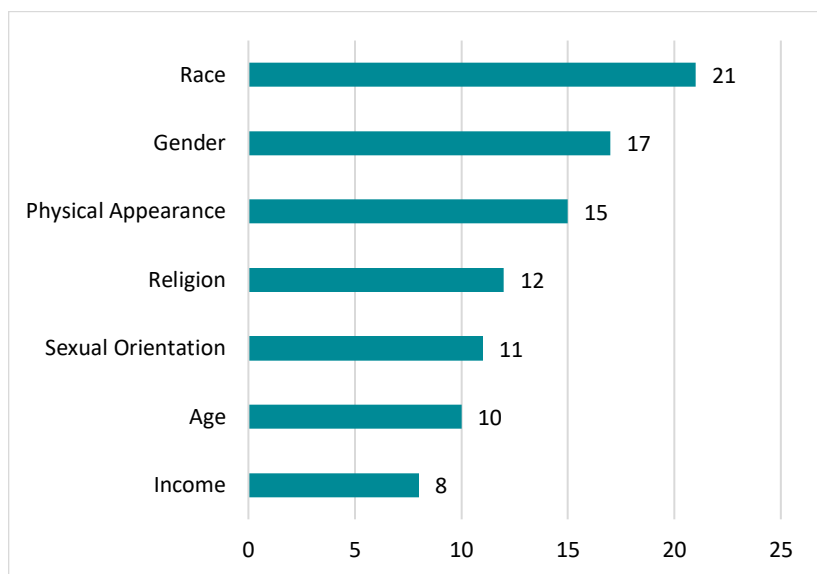
### KEY FINDINGS

- Empowerment programming for Black girls based in critical consciousness theory and Black feminism is an effective way to develop resilience.
- Participants critically reflected on their experiences, developed mutual support and positive gendered racial identity, and engaged in collective action.
- Evaluation findings reframe Black girls' justified resistance to oppression as a collective form of resilience.

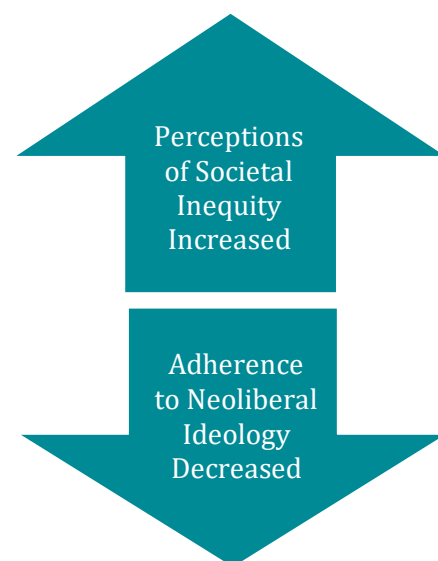
### HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

This study evaluated an empowerment program for Black girls based in critical consciousness theory and Black feminism designed to promote collective (rather than individual) resilience. This program, called the Black Girls Advocacy and Leadership Alliance (BGALA), was developed and piloted with high school girls in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2018-2019. Weekly after-school sessions focused on various components of the empowerment model, including positive gendered racial identity, critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Approximately 15 girls aged 13-17 completed the year-long program. The research team collected quantitative and qualitative data throughout the school year. Specifically, participating girls completed detailed surveys prior to participating in BGALA, halfway through the school year, and at the end of the school year.

## Number of participants (out of 33 total) reporting having experienced discrimination based on...



## Participants' critical consciousness increased over the course of the year



Additionally, a participant observer took detailed field notes at each BGALA session, and researchers conducted in-depth individual interviews with participating girls. Finally, a focus group was conducted during the final BGALA session of the year to provide an opportunity for girls to reflect on their experiences and describe their perceptions of the program's effects.

This research brief includes quantitative and qualitative findings. Paired samples t-tests were used to examine change over time in survey measures of girls' individual and collective resilience and empowerment. Researchers analyzed observation, interview, and focus group data to enhance understanding and interpretation of quantitative findings and to provide additional information on the effects of the BGALA program.

### WHAT WE FOUND

Black girls in the U.S. experience high rates of discrimination and face numerous structural barriers. The participants in the BGALA program are no exception, with two-thirds attributing experiences of everyday discrimination to their race, over half to their gender, a third to their age, and a fourth to the income level. In addition, about 40% reported being unfairly discouraged from continuing their education by a teacher or advisor, and a similar percentage reported being unfairly stopped, searched, questioned, physically threatened, or abused by the police. In addition, two-thirds reported getting in trouble at

school, including over 40% experiencing suspension and close to half experiencing disciplinary consequences for dress code violations.

Analyses of survey data revealed no change in measures of individual resilience. Notably, scores on depression and delinquent behaviors stayed constant, which is a positive finding given that these generally increase with age during the teen years. Analyses did find significant changes in measures related to the collective resilience promoted by the empowerment model. Specifically, there was an increase in perceptions of societal inequity and a decrease in adherence to neoliberal ideas that disregard systemic challenges, thus demonstrating the development of critical consciousness among participating girls.

**“When a boy’s messing with me, I usually tell him to stop messing with me or I walk out of the classroom. Then I get in trouble but the boy doesn’t.”**

— *BGALA participant on experiences of harassment*

Qualitative analyses showed that participants critically reflected on their experiences of oppression, developed mutual support and positive gendered racial identity, and engaged in collective action.

### WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

A growing body of research suggests that, in the face of adversity, engaging in the individual striving behaviors traditionally defined as resilient may lead to “success” as dominantly defined but can negatively impact health. When Black girls instead challenge their oppression, they are often deemed defiant or delinquent and disciplined accordingly. This study evaluated the effects of an empowerment program based on critical consciousness theory and Black feminism that was designed to enable Black girls to escape this double bind by channeling their justified resistance to oppression into critical awareness and collective action and thus promoting their collective (rather than individual) resilience.

Findings demonstrate the utility of this empowerment model in increasing critical reflection and positive gendered racial identity among Black girls, which challenges traditional individualized models of resilience and reframes Black girls’ resistance to injustice as an alternative, collective form of resilience. Given the mounting evidence of the harmful health effects of behaviors defined as individually resilient among people experiencing oppression, redefining resilience collectively and promoting it through empowerment interventions for Black girls and other marginalized youth is both promising and necessary.

**“So BGALA impacted me ... because like now when somebody says something, I actually get it, like I actually understand it. And then when they say something, I say something back. Like when dudes say something about females, that makes me so mad. Or when teachers say certain things about certain kids, it just makes me mad.”**

— *BGALA participant on critical consciousness*



**BGALA participants and facilitators, May 2019**

**“It’s a fun way to learn about how you can make a change for not only yourself but for other women and girls just like you.”**

— *BGALA participant on collective action*

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This brief was authored by Kathi Elliott, CEO of Gwen’s Girls, Inc., Sara Goodkind, Associate Professor, University of Pittsburgh, and Britney Brinkman, Associate Professor, Point Park University. They are 2017 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders fellows. For questions please contact: Kathi Elliott at [kelliott@gwensgirls.org](mailto:kelliott@gwensgirls.org), Sara Goodkind at [sara.goodkind@pitt.edu](mailto:sara.goodkind@pitt.edu) or Britney Brinkman at [bbrinkman@pointpark.edu](mailto:bbrinkman@pointpark.edu).