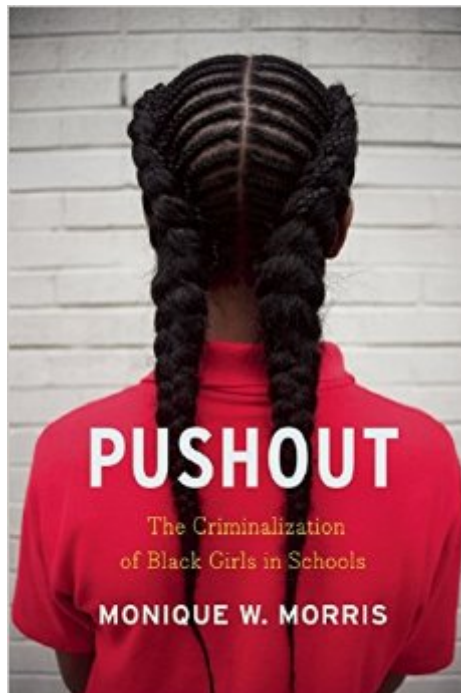


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# Pushout: The Criminalization Of Black Girls In Schools



## Synopsis

Fifteen-year-old Diamond stopped going to school the day she was expelled for lashing out at peers who constantly harassed and teased her for something everyone on the staff had missed: she was being trafficked for sex. After months on the run, she was arrested and sent to a detention center for violating a court order to attend school. Just 16 percent of female students, Black girls make up more than one-third of all girls with a school-related arrest. The first trade book to tell these untold stories, *Pushout* exposes a world of confined potential and supports the growing movement to address the policies, practices, and cultural illiteracy that push countless students out of school and into unhealthy, unstable, and often unsafe futures. For four years Monique W. Morris, author of *Black Stats*, chronicled the experiences of black girls across the country whose intricate lives are misunderstood, highly judged—by teachers, administrators, and the justice system—and degraded by the very institutions charged with helping them flourish. Morris shows how, despite obstacles, stigmas, stereotypes, and despair, black girls still find ways to breathe remarkable dignity into their lives in classrooms, juvenile facilities, and beyond.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*\* Trigger warning for discussions of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, sexual harassment, rape, and sexual trafficking. \*\*** — Born into a cultural legacy of slavery, Black American women have interpreted defiance as something that is not inherently bad. Harriet Tubman was defiant. — Michael Brown. Eric Garner. John Crawford III. Ezell Ford. Dante Parker. Tony

Robinson. Akai Gurley. Walter Scott. Freddie Gray. Tamir Rice. While the seemingly never-ending stream of tragedies involving the murder of unarmed black men and boys at the hands of law enforcement has focused media attention on the issues of police brutality, the militarization of local police forces, mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline, and systemic racism, too often women and girls are excluded from the discussion. However, intersectional feminist and anti-racist activists aim to center the experiences of black women, who must contend with both race- and gender-based oppression. Thanks to initiatives like #SayHerName and #BlackGirlsMatter, the names of Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, and Tarika Wilson will not be lost to history.

While writing *PUSHOUT: THE CRIMINALIZATION OF BLACK GIRLS IN SCHOOLS*, Monique W. Morris spent four years researching race and gender disparities in our educational system and engaging with the girls and women directly impacted: namely, young women in New Orleans, Chicago, New York, Boston, and Northern and Southern California. The result is a book that is as heartbreaking as it is informative. Though she uses several high-profile cases such as the assault of fifteen-year-old, bikini-clad Dajerria Becton at the hands of McKinney, Texas cop Eric Casebolt, and the handcuffing of six-year-old Floridian Desreatha Watson for throwing a tantrum in class as jumping-off points, Morris looks beyond the most egregious examples of excessive force. She delves deeper, exploring how the proliferation of "zero tolerance" policies in the 1990s, the presence of police or student resource officers (SROs) in schools, and the criminalization of minor or nonviolent offenses including behaviors that aren't even against the law, such as talking back or violating a school's dress code create a hostile educational environment, especially for black girls. According to Wikipedia, a "pushout" is a student that leaves school before graduation but not of her own volition. Perhaps more to the point, I read "pushout" as a verb: the process of removing a student from the classroom, be it through in- or out-school suspension, expulsion, house arrest, electronic monitoring, or placement in juvenile detention centers. Pushout may be as simple as kicking a "disruptive" student out of class to sit in the hallway or principal's office, neglecting them in the classroom, or actively discouraging participation. Some of the girls Morris interviewed reported being disciplined for asking questions in class; not knowing the answers to questions asked of them; or for finishing their classwork early (!). Given that we place such a premium on education in this country (or profess to, anyway), it seems outrageous to remove students from school unless they pose a real danger to themselves or others. Yet, this is precisely what's happening: it's not uncommon for students to be removed from class for minor offenses, such as falling asleep, playing with their

phones, arguing with others, or talking back to the teacher. Still others are turned away at the door for how they look: violating the school's dress code. The popular, knee-jerk reaction is to blame the students for misbehaving: what did she expect to happen? But this approach is both unhelpful (for example, punitive measures fail to address why a student might be lethargic or combative), and also overlooks the racism and sexism inherent in the creation and implementation of such rules. Morris argues, and convincingly so, that the behavior of black girls is more likely to be pathologized: labeled hypersexual, conniving, loud, and sassy. Furthermore, the shortened age continuum we impose on black girls has stripped [them] of their childhood freedoms. Collectively, we see black girls as more adult than they are, taking away their right to act like kids and teenagers' bad decision-making and all. Morris's interviewees provide ample anecdotal evidence of unequal treatment, but she also includes plenty of facts and figures to bolster her argument. Consider, for example:

- \* 25% of black women live in poverty.
- \* Low-performing schools are also high-poverty schools that produce higher rates of dropout (as it is traditionally understood) and underperformance among its students, and that high performing schools are often low-poverty ones.
- \* Black women are about three times more likely to be imprisoned than White women, and one in nineteen Black women will be incarcerated at some point in her lifetime.
- \* While Black girls are 16 percent of girls enrolled in school, a figure that has declined only slightly in the last decade, their rate of discipline has remained elevated. In 2000, Black girls were 34 percent of girls experiencing an out-of-school suspension. [...] By the 2009 academic year, Black girls were 52 percent of all girls with multiple out-of-school suspensions.
- \* This at a time when nationwide, the number of girls (of any racial and ethnic affiliation) who experienced one or more out of school suspensions decreased between 2000 and 2009 from 871,176 to 849,447.
- \* [I]n the 2011-12 school year, Black girls remained 31 percent of girls referred to law enforcement and were 34 percent of school-related arrests.
- \* Nearly 48 percent of Black girls who are expelled nationwide do not have access to educational services.
- \* (One of the most surprising things I learned in PUSHOUT is that not all schools are necessarily required to provide for a student's continued education during suspension. In some cases, the distribution of make-up work is left to the discretion of the teacher.)

The picture is even bleaker for girls who find themselves incarcerated in juvenile detention facilities. Though girls only account for 21% of such cases, the rate of arrest and detention is on the rise for them, even as it decreases for boys. Furthermore, girls (35.8 percent) are more likely than boys (21.9 percent) to be detained for status offenses and technical violations rather than for crimes that actually present a danger to public

safety. Girls who have received an education in such facilities report classwork that is inappropriate for their skill level (either too easy or too hard); overwhelmed, uncaring teachers who run the classroom more like a prison than a learning environment; an over-reliance on authority at the expense of respect; and trouble transferring their credits upon release. Unsurprisingly, a majority of detainees do not return to high school upon release. School dress codes are perhaps the biggest lightning rod for race and gender disparities and they also dovetail rather horrendously with another overlooked issue, sexual trafficking and how it affects student performance and welfare. Morris reports that 49% of public schools have a dress code of some type. Students found in violation might not even be let through the front doors, but rather sent home to change. This can pose a number of problems, especially for low-income students, starting with the very practical issue of transportation. Yet Morris's subjects also report unnecessarily strict and intractable dress codes that, for example, only allow for a specific type of shoes. What is a poverty-stricken student who only owns one pair of shoes to do? Still other girls report being turned away for something as minor as forgetting to wear a belt. Yet more to the point: overtly or implicitly, these dress codes impose harsher standards on girls, especially girls of color. Returning to Jezebel stereotype, black girls are seen as more mature and sexual than their white counterparts; thus, their clothing choices are sexualized as well. Girls who are "curvy" who have large chests and behinds are expected to dress more modestly. Men (and not a few women) turn their gaze on underage girls, and assume that they're dressing a certain way for others to attract the attention of boys and men when in fact they're expressing their individuality or just wearing shorts because it's darned hot outside. In short, we slut shame girls and women, objectify and sexualize them, all under the guise of "protecting" them from sexual harassment and assault. Instead of, you know, teaching boys and men not to rape, grope, catcall, fondle, etc. This is especially horrifying when viewed in the context of rape and sexual trafficking. According to the statistics cited by Morris, 40% of (reported) sex trafficking victims in the United States are black. 19% of black girls and women will be sexually victimized in their lifetimes. Unsurprisingly, these numbers increase dramatically among incarcerated girls: between 70 and 90% of girls in juvenile detention centers have some history of trauma, such as sexual, emotional, or physical abuse; at least 60% have experienced rape or attempted rape. Whereas black boys are victimized by the school-to-prison pipeline, for girls their oppression may take a different path: the sexual abuse to prison pipeline. Girls who are enslaved in the sex industry encounter even more obstacles in attaining an education, such as chronic absenteeism or drug addiction (often thanks to their pimps). Schools are not adequately equipped to identify the victims

of sex trafficking, let alone provide them help. Compounding the problem, these girls may be arrested for prostitution “never mind that they are victims of rape” and ordered to attend school as part of their probation. And when their “boyfriends” don’t allow them to attend? They’re found in violation and punished again. So, those dress codes. It’s bad enough to tell girls and young women that their dress is to blame for the sexual harassment and assault they may experience at the hands of boys (and grown men). But to impart this message to a rape victim or someone who has been sexually trafficked “all while the school does little or nothing to help her? I hope we can all agree that that is seriously fucked. Oh, and one more thing: dress codes frequently involve hairstyle as well. I think you know where I’m going with this, yes? Dismissed as “faddish,” “unprofessional,” “unkempt,” and the like, dress codes often disallow natural or “ethnic” hairstyles like afros and dreadlocks. (For more on the politics of black hair, see *HAIR STORY: UNTANGLING THE ROOTS OF BLACK HAIR IN AMERICA*.) It’s simply unconscionable to deny a girl an education because of your racist attitudes about her chosen hairstyle. Full stop. There’s so much more to discuss, but you’ll have to read the book to get the full picture. While I did largely enjoy *PUSHOUT* (as much as one can “enjoy” a book about human rights abuses), I thought the writing could be tightened up a little; some of the points are repetitive (though perhaps worth repeating?). The language is sometimes dense and jargon-y (particularly in the introduction), but not impenetrable; though perhaps aimed at academics, I think laypeople can get a lot out of it too. *PUSHOUT* is a timely, welcome contribution to the discussions coalescing around the BLM movement. Black Lives Matter “and Black Girls Matter too. Many of the girls who contributed to *PUSHOUT* recognize the importance of receiving a quality education (the liberative power of education) and it’s our responsibility to ensure that they receive it.”\*\* Full disclosure: I received a free electronic ARC for review through Edelweiss. \*\*

Ms. Morris has touched on a subject no one wants to talk about. We’ve long known how and why the law enforcement community discriminately target young black boys, and black men in particular. Now they’re targeting our young black girls. Who’s next?

This is extraordinary literary work! Author Monique Morris provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the gender experience of black girls and how this experience impacts black girls on an individual level, an interpersonal level, a community level and a policy/societal level. This also

increases the visibility of intersectionality scholarship, and elevates the voices of African-American girls.

The power of *Pushout* is the synergy that results from Dr. Morris' artful blending of facts with the frank and genuine voices of girls and young women who have experienced being "pushed out." Survivors of implicit bias and broken systems, through the pages of the book, the voices of girls call upon all of us to do better and to be tireless in fighting for change. Through her book Dr. Morris challenges us to not only see the injustice but to dismantle it. This book is must read for anyone who claims to care about social justice. You will finish this book, wanting to read it again to be sure that you have grasped all the insight, information and the wisdom from the experiences of girls packed into the book. Dr. Morris and her book are changing the world!

Any teacher who works with black girls absolutely must read this book. In the sea of education books on how we can leverage technology, redesign our classrooms and improve our instruction, *Pushout* is something completely different. It caught my attention right away, because every year I was in the classroom, I taught black girls. Some were very successful, others were not. And I never really considered whether there might be something unique in the way those girls experienced school, something I might have been able to adjust in the way I approached them, that would have helped a whole lot more of them truly thrive in school and in life. That's what Monique Morris studied. Over the course of four years, she interviewed black girls about their experiences in schools. What she learned is that most schools have policies in place that marginalize these girls, and most teachers haven't been trained in the cultural competencies that would enable us to help these girls truly thrive. In the book, Morris starts by showing us exactly how the pushout happens, how zero-tolerance policies and cultural misunderstandings between black girls and their teachers can result in punishments that far outmatch the original offense. She examines how the dominant culture in our schools--the way we define a "good" student as one who is quiet and compliant--leaves no room for the assertive outspokenness these girls tend to bring with them. Faced with this outspokenness, this "attitude," we respond in ways that only make the girls feel disrespected and misunderstood, setting off a vicious cycle that usually ends in suspension or expulsion. When we suspend a child, we hurt her academically. We make it less likely that she will succeed in school. And when she doesn't, other environments are waiting for her with open arms: abusive relationships, sex trafficking, and incarceration. Morris shows us the path that starts with a black girl not meeting the expectations at school and ends with her in damaging and

dangerous situations. It's a disturbing and heartbreaking path, but then she leads us back again and teaches us how to blaze a new trail, how to learn new ways of responding to the unique qualities our young black girls bring with them to school, how to nurture them and lead them through their education with love. When I read this book, I thought back to some of the girls I'd taught, the ones who did not thrive. If I'd had Pushout back then, I know I would have done better by them. My hope is that all educators who work with black girls will take the time to read this beautifully written and very important book.

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