

THE INNOCENCE INITIATIVE: TRANSLATING NATIONAL RESEARCH INTO LOCAL ACTION IN CENTRAL TEXAS

INITIATIVE ON
**GENDER
JUSTICE &
OPPORTUNIT**

GEORGETOWN LAW

CENTER ON POVERTY and INEQUALITY

PROJECT OVERVIEW

What is the Innocence Initiative?



The Innocence Initiative is a community coalition working to eliminate adultification bias against Black girls in Central Texas.

The creation of the Innocence Initiative was inspired by the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity's publication of *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, describing research on adultification bias led by Dr. Jamilia Blake with the Initiative. The study, which revealed that adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers even at early ages, suggested a

root cause for punitive treatment against Black girls in school and the juvenile justice system. The study provided language and data to corroborate a form of discrimination commonly faced by Black girls. The Innocence Initiative formed to address adultification bias within its community.

Developed by five nonprofit organizations in the region—Girl Scouts of Central Texas, Hearts2Heal, Lone Star Justice Alliance (LSJA), Community Advocacy and Healing Project, and MEASURE (See Appendix A)—this coalition received seed funding from Impact Austin.



The Innocence Initiative's Model

The Innocence Initiative used a community mobilization process designed by MEASURE to identify challenges associated with adultification bias in the Central Texas community and develop solutions (See Appendix B). It held five community-led listening and training sessions, with a total of 565 attendees, to collect data on community members' experiences of adultification bias and potential courses of action to address the issue.

The Innocence Initiative's Plan of Action

At the outset, the Innocence Initiative identified five courses of action it would undertake to disrupt adultification bias and eliminate harmful, stereotypical perceptions of Black girls:

1. Create a community healing and recruitment event for Black girls in partnership with Girls Scouts of Central Texas, designed to support girls of color through activities including storytelling, yoga, self-defense, and self-care;
2. Launch a public awareness campaign about adultification bias, including educational community events and publications;
3. Develop a unified community effort to advocate for reform at school board meetings, specifically aimed at establishing alternative approaches to punitive school discipline policy;
4. Train fifty Central Texas defense attorneys in identifying adultification bias and incorporating racial justice in juvenile defense litigation; and

5. Partner with the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice and Opportunity to enhance the Innocence Initiative's work on adultification bias.

The Innocence Initiative used the following metrics to measure success of these courses of action:

1. Implementation of new school policies intended to reduce adultification bias and racial discrimination against Black girls;
2. Attendance of adultification bias trainings by teachers, attorneys, and parents/guardians; and
3. Decreased rates of school discipline against Black girls.

The Innocence Initiative's Key Findings

The Innocence Initiative's listening and training sessions identified three key themes:

Solutions to adultification bias must be community-led.

Participants in the Innocence Initiative's listening sessions identified the importance of solutions that are grounded in the community's input. Ideas for community-led solutions to combat adultification bias included:

- Raising awareness of adultification bias in schools and communities through public campaigns;
- Collaborating with historically Black colleges and universities to host conversations and trainings on adultification bias;

- Holding local schools accountable for the inappropriate hypersexualization of Black girls by advocating against school policies that perpetuate adultification bias; and
- Addressing biases in the juvenile justice system that contribute to the assumption that Black girls are perpetrators rather than victims by ensuring local judges, social workers, and attorneys have access to the training they need to identify adultification bias.

Stereotypes that harm Black girls must be dismantled.

Participants in the listening sessions identified harmful effects of stereotypes that perpetuate adultification bias against Black girls. These included the “angry Black woman” stereotype, which contributes to disproportionately high rates of school suspension and justice system referral, and the community’s overlooking and oppressing Black girls.

Discussion of potential solutions included:

- Facilitating community storytelling about experiences of adultification bias;

- Creating leadership and mentorship opportunities for Black girls at school to increase school connectedness; and
- Addressing harmful stereotypes through implicit bias trainings and collaboration with community advocacy organizations.

Policies and practices must be reformed to protect Black girls.

Participants in the listening sessions discussed current policies and practices in the education and juvenile justice systems that disproportionately harm Black girls in Central Texas, including curfews and zero-tolerance school discipline policies. Proposed solutions included:

- Equipping and empowering individuals in the community to engage in self-advocacy;
- Unifying as a community to address harmful policies; and
- Building an advocacy coalition to raise awareness of local organizations’ legal reform efforts.

IMPACT, DELIVERABLES, AND OUTCOMES

The Innocence Initiative translated national research into local action using a participatory action research model to ignite community mobilization and engage in collaborative thinking to disrupt adultification bias against Black girls and achieve equity. The Innocence Initiative has had a significant and multi-faceted impact within the Central Texas region, including:

1. Five community-led listening and training sessions to raise public awareness of adultification bias, attended by over 565 parents, teachers, and advocates;
2. Publication of an original comic book designed to empower Black girls and help their communities identify adultification bias, distributed to 15,000 Central Texas homes;
3. Development of new mobile public library routes and stops throughout underserved neighborhoods in Austin, Texas to promote a public awareness campaign about the Innocence Initiative's goal of combatting adultification bias;
4. Policy recommendations to regional school district leadership and state legislators to combat adultification bias and other forms of racism against Black girls in school, including:

School Policy Recommendations:

- Mandate data collection on school discipline data disaggregated by gender and race;
- Eliminate Texas Education Code § 37.002 (of the Safe Schools Act of 1995), which provides teachers with discretionary authority to remove students from the classroom indefinitely; and eliminate all discretionary exclusionary discipline practices;

- Eliminate school resource officers and shift funding to increase mental health services;
- Eliminate disciplinary actions related to hair style or texture and dress codes;

State Policy Recommendations:

- Require the Texas Education Agency to disaggregate all existing data collection by race and gender to increase transparency of academic performance in Texas schools;
 - Require all educators to complete professional development courses on implicit bias, hostile class environments, and culturally responsive teaching at a minimum of four times per academic year as part of annual compliance;
5. Featured media coverage in prominent regional news publications, including *Austin Women's Magazine*, *Austin360.org*, and *KXAN*; and a steady high volume of social media engagement throughout the duration of the project;
 6. Partnership with the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity to create a publication, events, and other products uplifting the issue of adultification bias and describing the Innocence Initiative's community impact.

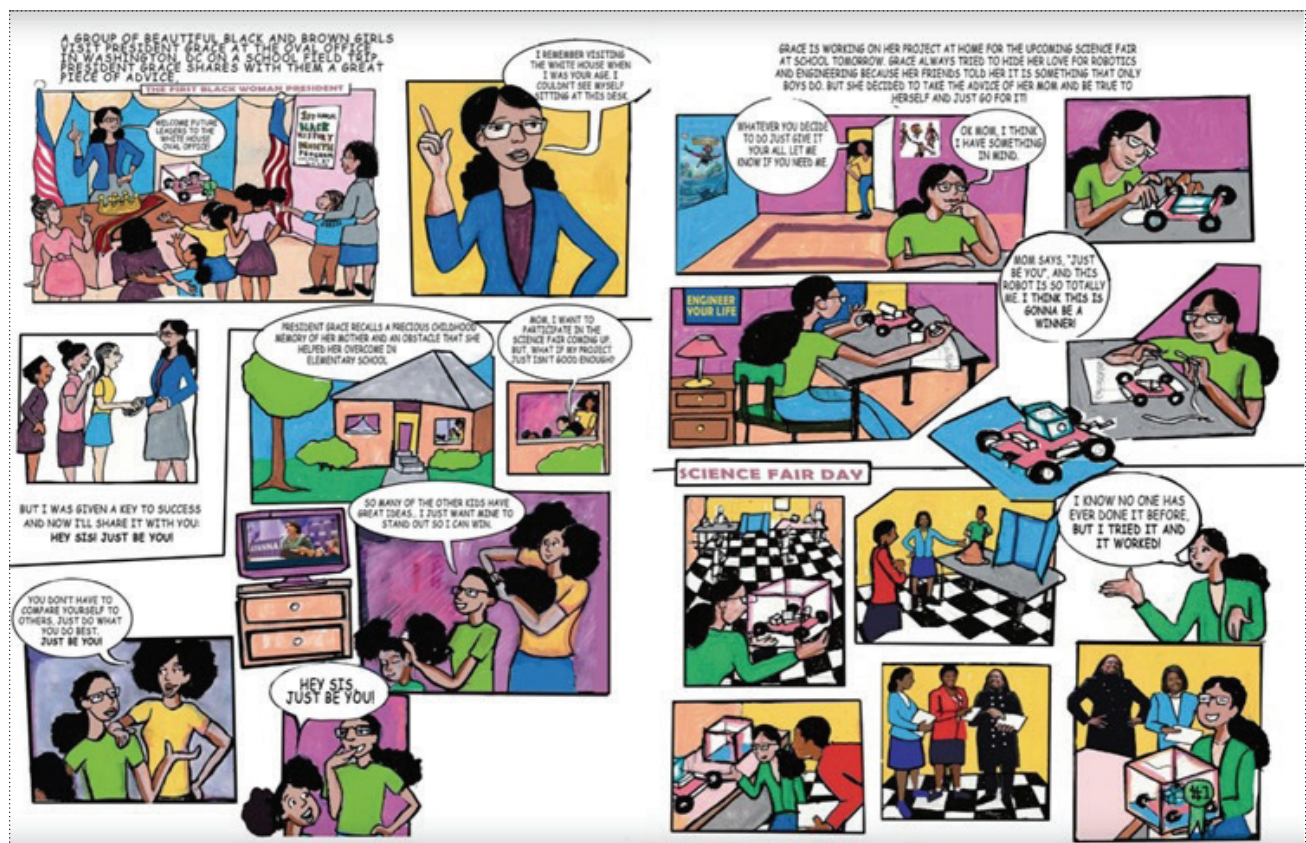
CITY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Innocence Initiative's community-led listening sessions also resulted in the development of policy recommendations to city councils to promote other anti-racism policies, including:

1. Increase program funding to support Black girls' physical fitness, mental wellness, academic and professional development, and access to mentorship opportunities;
2. Collect data on youth being served by city programs, disaggregated by gender, race, and economic status; and provide a yearly update on key performance indicators;
3. Protect Black city employees from race-based hair discrimination, including passage of the CROWN Act.

"Hey Sis, Just Be You." Comic Book

"Hey Sis, Just Be You" is a graphic-novel-style publication to raise awareness of adultification bias and inspire parents to advocate for their Black daughters by identifying harmful and discriminatory laws, policies, and programs. It was written by the MEASURE Comic Book CARE Team: Meme Styles, Selah Vie, Mickey Cappello, Precious Azuree, Monica Hammond, Sharon Jacob, Latasha Norwood, Jeremy Horne, and Lakeem Wilson. It was illustrated by Lakeem Wilson.



"It's really personal when they give you a mentor and you get to check in. You feel more of a sense of belonging when you know that there are other people with you, hearing you, and listening to you." — Travis County Girls Squad Mentee

"It takes a village to protect, nurture, and love a Black girl. The Innocence Initiative has literally written the accountability guide on how to create and operationalize this understanding." — Meme Styles, President & Founder of MEASURE

Lessons Learned & Areas for Expansion in Future Advocacy Efforts

The Innocence Initiative can serve as a model for other communities and local initiatives to adapt to their specific regional needs. Lessons learned include:

- **The active leadership and participation of the community** was instrumental to achieving and exceeding the project's expected outcomes, including widely attended professional trainings, the development of community-specific policy recommendations, and extensive media coverage.
- **Grounding work in the community** built strong awareness and momentum for disrupting adultification bias and the systemic structures that perpetuate it.
- **More funding and resources were required** to meet all of the project's goals, including the development of an online tool to connect families faced with juvenile justice system involvement to qualified legal professionals. The founding collaborative of the Innocence Initiative is seeking alternative sources of support to vet legal professional candidates for family referrals in the coming months.



The founders of the Innocence Initiative collaborative, pictured from left to right: Maria Brown Spence, Hearts2Heal; Elizabeth Heneeke, Lone Star Justice Alliance; Fatima Mann, Community Advocacy & Healing Project; Meme Styles, MEASURE; Earnid Carter, Girl Scouts of Central Texas

APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Innocence Initiative's Founding Collaborative

- **MEASURE** is an Austin-based nonprofit organization working to empower community members impacted by social disparities by providing data and evaluation support to organizations and collaborations led by people of color.
- **Hearts2Heal** is an Austin-based nonprofit organization working to eliminate racial disparities and stigma and increase peer support for workers of color through culturally appropriate and trauma-informed peer education.
- **Lone Star Justice Alliance** is a nonprofit legal organization working to improve the lives of youth and emerging adults in the justice system through issue briefs, community improvement programs, and litigation.
- **Community Advocacy & Healing Project** is an Austin-based nonprofit organization working to cultivate culturally appropriate and trauma-informed community healing of systemic oppression through mindfulness and human-centered engagement.
- **Girl Scouts of Central Texas** is the local chapter of the national Girl Scouts leadership development organization, working on building girls' courage, confidence, and character through community programming and volunteering.

Appendix B: MEASURE's CARE Model

In conducting its work, the Innocence Initiative used "CARE," a community participatory action research model developed by MEASURE. CARE stands for Community, Advocacy, Resilience, and Evidence. Each of the Innocence Initiative's listening sessions were structured around this model.

For example, the virtual event entitled "Disrupting Adultification Bias: A Living Room Chat" consisted of four breakout rooms to facilitate discussion about each component of the CARE model:

- **Community:** How can community members (youth, parents, teachers, and policymakers) work to make sure Black girls are treated fairly in schools and at home?
- **Advocacy:** What are examples of stereotypes that shape educators' and administrators' views of Black girls in critically harmful ways? How can we transform those negative images?
- **Resilience:** What are the biggest challenges Black girls are facing during COVID-19?
- **Evidence:** How can data and statistics be used to elevate Black girls' stories?

Appendix C: Timeline of Events

December 4, 2019

Town Hall

This event was designed to inform the community about adultification bias and the national research conducted by Georgetown. Community members signed up to contribute to the Innocence Initiative's work as research participants.

February 13, 2020

"Disrupting Jezebel"

The Initiative used this initial community listening session to gather information on the harmful effects perpetuated against Black girls by the "Jezebel" stereotype. An expert panel followed on how the stereotype manifests in the education and juvenile justice systems.

March 12, 2020

"I'm Not Your Mammy"

This community listening session served as a data-gathering and educational event on the impact of the "Mammy" stereotype against Black women. An expert panel followed on the history of the stereotype and its relationship to the "Jezebel" stereotype.

May 19, 2020

"Unpacking the Sapphire Stereotype"

This virtual event featured local expert and advocate Jacqueline Miller, who covered a variety of topics related to the perpetuation of the "Sapphire" stereotype against Black girls. Participants discussed ways to dismantle the stereotype, including storytelling and contextualizing behavior.

June 16, 2020

Disrupting Adultification Bias: A Living Room Chat

This virtual community data gathering session utilized a variety of online techniques to facilitate discussion, including a video screening on Georgetown's 2017 study, virtual polling, and reflection in virtual breakout rooms. Participants developed the following strategies to disrupt adultification bias:

- School connectedness;
- Opportunities for mentorship and leadership in school;
- Culturally competent and responsive staff and curricula;
- Collection and disaggregation of school discipline data by race and gender;

- Increased collaboration between parents, schools, and advocacy organizations;
- Conversations between stakeholders and policymakers; and
- Story sharing within the community.

July 11, 2020

Raising Race and Addressing Adultification Bias

LSJA, MEASURE, and the Travis County Public Defenders Office hosted a virtual training to teach professionals in the juvenile justice system how to identify adultification bias in juvenile defense litigation and how to center girls of color in their commitment to achieving racial equity. Over 700 attorneys sought credit from the Texas State Bar for completing the training.

July 29, 2020

Disrupting Adultification Bias to Protect Black Girls

Local expert and advocate Jacqueline Miller facilitated discussion by sharing her own experiences with adultification bias and harmful stereotypes. The Initiative designed this event to help an audience of teachers, parents, policymakers, and public safety advocates identify their own harmful behaviors toward Black girls. Participants used storytelling and reflection techniques to identify and begin to change these harmful behaviors, which included passing judgement on Black girls' clothing and appearance and closing off opportunities for Black girls to share their feelings and experiences.

August 22, 2020

"Hey Sis! It's Storytime"

This storytelling event featured prominent Black female community leaders reading aloud from the Innocence Initiative's original comic book, "Hey Sis, Just Be You.," to raise awareness of adultification bias. (See image page 6). The audience participants, which predominantly included Black women in the community and their daughters, identified areas for advocacy during a discussion that followed the reading, including:

- Changing dress codes and associated punitive disciplinary policies in high school;
- Raising awareness of adultification bias among parents and students; and
- Educating school safety personnel on adultification bias in school resource officer training.

EVENTS RELATED TO COVID-19

When the pandemic hit the community, the Innocence Initiative shifted its focus to include hosting events to respond to the urgent needs of the community by facilitating discussions, supports, and services for Black girls in need, and advocating for vulnerable members of the community.

April 2, 2020

Austin Youth Justice and COVID-19 Webinar

This virtual event addressed the importance of releasing incarcerated young people in Central Texas—a majority of whom are people of color—to protect their health during the pandemic. This discussion led to a collaborative effort between the Innocence Initiative and Travis County Juvenile Defenders Office to develop the Travis County Girls Squad, following the compassionate release of many young people from Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center.

June 5, 2020 & June 17, 2020

Travis County Girls Squad: Call for Black Women Mentors

The Initiative used this two-part event to recruit Black women professionals to serve as mentors for the Travis County Girls Squad, a mentoring program aimed at supporting Black girls during the pandemic through opportunities for healthy connection, basic needs support, and mental wellness partnership.