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Regulating Girlhood: Protecting and Prosecuting Juvenile Violence

Wendy Wolters Hinshaw

School shootings by students at the end of the twentieth century, most notably the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, changed the national discourse on school violence by shifting public attention to youth behaviors that previously went under the radar, particularly at suburban and predominantly white schools. A 2002 report by the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education identifying bullying as a common thread among thirty-seven school shootings in the United States helped to further frame bullying as not only a precipitator of school violence but as a form of violence endemic to schools (Vossekuil et al.). The resulting national spotlight on bullying has helped to draw attention to an issue that has been linked to youth suicide and retaliatory school violence and that prevents an estimated 160,000 students from attending school each year (Fried and Fried).

Since Columbine, public anxieties about bullying have inflamed concern about a “bullying epidemic” or crisis that threatens the safety and educational access of all youth, and have fueled increasingly punitive responses to misbehavior in schools as well as wider criminal prosecutions and incarcerations of youth (Rigby and Smith). Currently, forty-nine states (all but Montana) have passed some form of state-level anti-bullying legislation. According to BullyPolice.org, a prominent watchdog organization for anti-bullying legislation, thirty-four states have passed legislation since 2005, eight of them since 2010 (BullyPolice). A 2011 Department of Education analysis of state bullying laws and policies reports that between 1999 and 2010 there were more than 120 bills enacted by state legislatures nationally either introducing or amend-

jac 33.3–4 (2013)

ing educational or criminal statutes addressing bullying, and twenty-one new bills passed in 2010 alone (Stuart-Cassel, et al. xi).

The specifics of anti-bullying legislation vary from state to state, but the steady increase in the passage of such legislation throughout the last decade resembles a new arms race for bullying legislation and enforcement. The 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut has inspired further militarizing discourse in the name of protecting students and keeping students safe, but such discourse overlooks the extent to which many schools are already policed in the name of safety. School districts in Houston, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Miami, Chicago, Palm Beach County, and others have their own police departments, with all the powers of local police but jurisdictions limited to school grounds (Advancement Project 17). However, where post-Sandy Hook calls for militarized schools are premised on an external threat of violence, existing policies and practices target youth themselves, regulating the behavior of poor and minority youth in particular.

Arguably, schools have always been a site for regulating bodies and forming citizen-subjects within dominant social and cultural frameworks. But historically schools have also figured as protective spaces designed to shelter children from the adult world, as a resource for serving children who are otherwise missing basic needs, as well as sites for guiding and intervening on behalf of children missing core social or educational skills. However, as Jonathan Simon suggests, schools are increasingly governed by “criminal pedagogies,” where “the pathways of knowledge and power within the school are being shaped by crime as the model problem, and tools of criminal justice as the dominant technologies” (209). Protecting children from the outside world has increasingly evolved into protecting them from each other, or, more specifically, protecting particular classes of children by prosecuting others. The expansion of anti-bullying legislation has broadened conceptualizations of the kinds of behaviors that constitute bullying, particularly among girls. Anti-bullying programs following Columbine initially drew from research on violence and physical aggression among boys (the primary perpetrators of school shootings), but a presumed discovery of female bullying at the end of the twentieth century has inspired a growing body

of popular and academic research focused on defining and containing girls' aggression. Representations of "mean" girlhood have increasingly normalized violence among girls and constructed an image of girl culture as inherently dangerous and threatening. Rhetorics of gender balance and correction designed to provide equal attention to girl bullying justify a public focus on mean girlhood, and at the same time distract from the dismantling of earlier gender-focused educational reforms. This trend has reinforced the disconnect between bullying and the social conditions that help produce it, as girl bullying is rarely linked to gender socialization within patriarchal social structures, and rarely represented in relation to anti-gay bullying or racial discrimination.

In the context of growing vigilance against school violence, a rhetorical method of inquiry helps us understand how injuries and identities are made visible through state and public attempts to protect and prosecute children. Current legislation and policies regulating youth behavior articulate rhetorical and material conditions for identifying some youth as threatened and others as threatening; for protecting some youth by prosecuting others. The growing focus on nonphysical aggression, particularly among girls, reveals the extent to which anti-bullying rhetorics and policies are defining injury via a broadening spectrum of individual behavior. In spite of social justice efforts to mobilize anti-bullying laws to address structural inequality and violence against gay youth, emerging frameworks for recognizing youth violence decontextualize youth behavior from identity categories including race and gender, which have served as the basis of previous educational reforms, and instead recontextualize all youth misbehavior in relation to broader threats to school safety. The growing focus on nonphysical aggression enables broad-based anti-bullying activism that simultaneously widens the spectrum of surveillance while also propelling the myth that targeting behaviors over identities is ideologically and politically neutral. Such frameworks ultimately increase suspicion of all youth, and result in the disproportionate targeting and criminalization of poor and minority youth in particular.

Prosecuting Mean Girls

As concerns over relational and non-physical modes of aggression have captured an increasing share of the broader bullying discourse, conflict between girls has been cast as an increasingly serious social problem and threat to girls at younger and younger ages. In short, girls have not only become the most serious threat facing other girls, but to school safety in general. Starting with the popular-selling 2002 books *Odd Girl Out* by Rachel Simmons and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman (the latter of which was the source behind the 2004 film *Mean Girls*), a growing cadre of popular and academic research has made the image of the “mean girl” increasingly specific—typically a white, privileged girl or group of girls (often cheerleaders) who are academically and socially successful and who use manipulative and largely non-physical tactics such as exclusion, spreading rumors and name-calling to shame, humiliate and intimidate other girls. In the forward to the revised and updated 2011 edition of her book, Simmons boasts that her book’s original publication in 2002 “lit a fuse in the culture, setting off a passionate dialogue about girls and bullying” that provided girls and parents “a platform, language, and community” (xv). This platform has expanded to organizations and workshops founded by both authors, and Simmons and Wiseman have helped to launch a whole industry of media devoted to the problem of girls’ aggression. An amazon.com search of either book reveals a host of related suggestions including *Little Girls Can Be Mean*; *Girl Wars*; *Understanding Girl Bullying and What to Do*; *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, and, perhaps the grouchiest option, *Students Who Drive You Crazy: Succeeding With Resistant, Unmotivated, and Otherwise Difficult Young People* (the cover image on this one is priceless). Wiseman’s 2006 follow-up book *Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads* extends her analysis of the characters in “Girl World” into Adult World, and her most recent *Boys, Girls, and Other Hazardous Materials* confirms that the youth threat is only getting worse.

The Kind Campaign, which describes itself as trying to combat “girl-against-girl ‘crime,’” provides an important example of pedagogical and public responses to the perceived problem of girl bullying. The organization was founded in 2009 by two young women, Molly Thompson and

Lauren Parsekian, and the documentary film *Finding Kind* is the centerpiece of the Kind Campaign. Released in 2011, the film is currently being shown in middle and high schools across the country and has also appeared in several small independent film festivals. In *Finding Kind*, Parsekian and Thompson cross the country to search for reasons “why girls are so mean to each other” and build a school program aimed at stopping girl bullying. The Kind Campaign approaches bullying as a problem that affects all girls and is thus distinct from anti-bullying programs and public representations of bullying that focus on distinguishing bullies from victims (such as the 2012 film *Bully*). *Finding Kind* builds identification with its target girl audience by recognizing the fluid nature of bully-bullied social positions. Programs and pedagogical approaches that target bullies and victims have often proved ineffective, perhaps largely because audiences are reluctant to identify with either position. The film’s discussion of the shared responsibility of witnesses to bullying is also important, as recent studies have suggested that anti-bullying programs focusing on bystanders (a much more comfortable identificatory position) are the most successful (Swearer et al.).

The Kind Campaign’s focus on the shared responsibility for and broad effects of girl bullying is important. However, their reliance on the word “crime” to describe behaviors that are decidedly *not* crimes is indicative of the stakes the Kind Campaign sees in bad behavior by girls. In their mission statement and other materials the organization insists,

Every single female has encountered an experience in which they become aggressors or victims of girl-against-girl “crime.” Physical fighting, name-calling, threats, power struggles, competition, manipulation, secrets, rumors, and ostracizing other girls all fall under the category of girl-against-girl “crime.”
(Kind Campaign)

The Kind Campaign’s conflation of crime with bullying behaviors—including name-calling, secrets, and competition—is representative of efforts by schools and policymakers to recontextualize individual youth misbehaviors within broader criminal frameworks. In *Finding Kind*, the filmmakers address a series of girl-only school audiences and ask students to “raise your hands if you’ve ever been negatively affected by

something another girl has said or done to you.” A series of images of girls in auditoriums and classrooms unanimously raising their hands follows, but such a loose equation between “negative experiences” and “girl-against-girl crime” seems at the very least hollow and, at worst, a dangerous attempt to rein in all kinds of behavior by girls. Such determinations oversimplify the complex ways in which aggression and violence are gendered in our culture, as well as the multiple sources of violence in girls’ lives.

In *Beyond Bad Girls*, Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin challenge contemporary media constructions of “bad girls” and demonstrate their relationship to historical and contemporary efforts to control girls’ behavior. As Chesney-Lind and Irwin suggest, “the mean girl story is a new twist on a very old and damaging construction of women . . . [in which] traditionally women have been viewed as nice on the outside but venomous and manipulative on inside” (21). Contemporary obsessions with mean girls and girl bullying represent just the latest stage in a long history of social control of girls. As Mary Odem and others have shown, nineteenth-century responses to “wayward girls” reflected and also reinforced public and discursive distinctions about which girls were threatened and which were threatening. Nineteenth-century concerns focused primarily on girls’ sexuality whereas more recent concerns focus on girls’ violence, but both demonstrate the suspicion and threat that girls continue to represent to society.

As law and policy-makers have sought increased means of regulating youth misbehavior, they have fed from and fed into the media phenomenon of the mean girl, attempting to balance (and broaden) earlier focuses on physical bullying by boys through an increased attention to relational aggression that has been presumed to be characteristic of girls. Popular investigations and representations of school bullying increasingly characterize relationally aggressive behaviors as almost entirely characteristic of girls, and also as comparatively more serious and impactful than physically aggressive behaviors committed by boys. However, these representations are often too eager to prove girl-bullying to be as serious as bullying among boys, and/or to apply bullying prevention and intervention programs equally to girls in order to achieve a perceived gender neutrality. In fact, the majority of bullying and aggression research has

focused on boys. Much of the psychological and educational research documenting relational aggression and its impact on girls' development has produced mixed findings: relational aggression has not been correlated as predictive of more directly aggressive behaviors, and is in fact correlated with many other pro-social behaviors, and is only predominant among girls during early childhood. By late adolescence it is distributed almost evenly among boys and girls (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 109–11).

The Kind Campaign exaggerates the harm of girl-on-girl conflict, and its insistence on kindness as an easy solution contributes to a growing policing of all girl behavior, where the range of available “good” behaviors for girls grows steadily smaller. Condemning competition and name-calling as “girl-against-girl ‘crimes’” clearly narrows the range of acceptable girl behavior, reiterating long-standing cultural taboos that discourage girls from open competition and expressing feelings, and ultimately reinforces what Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan have called a “tyranny of nice and kind” that shapes the worlds of adolescent and teenage girls. According to Brown and Gilligan, girls receive strong messages early in adolescence that

reinforc[e] images of female perfection by implying that “nice girls” are always calm, controlled, quiet, that they never cause a ruckus, are never noisy, bossy, or aggressive, are not anxious and do not cause trouble, and also by implying that such girls exist and are desirable. (Brown and Gilligan 61)

Unrealistic expectations and narrow definitions of “good” girl behavior naturally set girls and women up for failure. It's not surprising, then, that the many girls and parents interviewed in *Finding Kind*, as well as psychologists and educators (including Wiseman), testify to girls' universal “viciousness” and boys' comparative rationality and fairness. In one scene in the film, two young teenage girls (both white) interviewed in a shopping mall agree that girls are meaner than boys: one girl tells the camera “guys are all friends and stuff, and girls are just like ‘I don't like you’ and stuff.” The film stresses throughout that this is a major point of difference between the sexes—that men and boys “fight it out and get over it,” whereas girls and women are unable to communicate effectively about conflict or resolve conflict.

The impact of violence when boys “fight it out” is minimized in *Finding Kind*, as it is in much of the media surrounding girls’ aggression. As campaigns like *Kind* and other media focus on girl bullying and “meanness,” they continue to deflect attention away from institutional and social conditions that contribute to violence experienced by girls. Current representations of girl bullying demonstrate a significant turn in popular scholarship since the 1990s, when literature on girls’ education and development focused largely on how girls were impacted by broader cultural patterns, including the effects of sexual harassment and violence on girls’ self-esteem and educational access (see Orenstein; Pipher). Contemporary representations of girlhood have shifted from investigating the ways in which a patriarchal and consumer culture puts girls’ self-esteem and general health at risk, to investigating the ways in which girl culture or “Girl World” is itself harmful, and such representations locate increasing responsibility in girls themselves.

The growing focus on individual behaviors responds to and also informs policies that target and criminalize youth behaviors while simultaneously dismantling education reforms that previously framed discourses of school safety. Title IX, which protects students from sex discrimination in education, established the language of sexual harassment in school policies across the country, and served as an initial framework for many anti-bullying state laws and policies. However, in the flurry of legislation over the last decade, the language of harassment has become increasingly absorbed into broader bullying discourse: Washington state law uses the terms “harassment, intimidation, and bullying,” and Mississippi uses “bullying or harassing behavior” interchangeably (Connolly 283). As Nan Stein argues, the rights discourses that had shaped school harassment policies before Columbine have been steadily obscured by bullying discourses that “shift the discussion of school safety away from a larger civil rights framework (racial and sexual harassment) to one that focuses on, pathologizes, and in some cases, demonizes individual behavior” (787).

As bullying becomes a euphemism for a spectrum of behaviors, it’s certainly not surprising that school reports and programming on sexual harassment and violence as well as racial violence have decreased. The 2011 AAUW report on sexual harassment in schools finds that “Too

often, the more comfortable term *bullying* is used to describe sexual harassment, obscuring the role of gender and sex in these incidents” and “Schools are likely to promote bullying prevention while ignoring or downplaying sexual harassment” (Hill and Kearl 7). This increased focus on bullying and decreased focus on sexual harassment is also reflected in school reports of crime and safety: during the 2007-2008 school year twenty-five percent of public schools reported that bullying occurred on a daily or weekly basis but only four percent reported student racial/ethnic tensions and only three percent reported student sexual harassment of other students (Roberts et al. iv-v). These staggeringly low reports by schools of sexual harassment and racial tension stand in stark contrast to findings by AAUW that more than eighty percent of students experience sexual harassment at least once in their school career (Hill and Kearl 10). Nearly half of students (forty-eight percent) experience some form of sexual harassment during the course of a school year, and 87 percent indicate that it has a negative effect on them (Hill and Kearl 2).

The universal picture of girls’ meanness that *Kind* and other campaigns present ultimately blames girls—femaleness really—for violence against girls, and avoids analysis of the impact of structural systems of inequality (including racism, sexism, and homophobia) on such violence. *Finding Kind* makes no mention of racism or homophobia. Ever. Nor does the film acknowledge the wider spectrum of violence—both physical and non-physical—that girls and women are subject to, primarily at the hands of boys and men. Because of this, conflict and violence look like problems located squarely within the boundaries of *Girl World*, meanness and bullying become defined as “girl” problems within this logic, and bullying and meanness by other girls is perceived to be the most serious problem facing girls and women.

Protecting Children’s Rights

Although anti-bullying legislation has thus-far been limited to the state-level, the growing momentum toward federal legislation was demonstrated in a March 2011 White House Anti-Bullying Summit and launch of an accompanying national campaign and website, “StopBullying.gov”

(Khadaroo, “Obama”). The white house conference reiterated anti-bullying policy guidelines developed by the Department of Education and also drew attention to proposed national anti-bullying legislation, including revisions to the Safe Schools Improvement Act that would include comprehensive anti-bullying policies with specific language addressing populations targeted based on race, religion, and sexual orientation, as well as the Student Non-Discrimination Act, which would protect students from discrimination and harassment “based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity” (Khadaroo, “Obama”). The White House conference came on the heels of a number of highly publicized suicides among school-age children and adolescents that have been linked to bullying, including Phoebe Prince, a fifteen year-old Boston-area high school freshman whose January 2010 suicide received extensive national attention. Coverage of her suicide was fueled by speculation about the role of popular “mean girls” in causing her death, and the unprecedented adult felony charges brought against six of Prince’s classmates as a result of her suicide dubbed Prince “this generation’s Columbine moment for school bullying” (Khadaroo “Phoebe Prince”; “Watershed”). Prince’s suicide also added pressure for the passage of an anti-bullying law in Massachusetts later that spring, deemed “the most comprehensive bill in the country” at the time (Contrada).

Several of the participants in the white house conference were parents of children who had committed suicide due to bullying, particularly anti-gay bullying. Where attention to girl bullying has been primarily shaped by individualized and girl-blaming frameworks, activism against anti-gay bullying has been located within discourses of equal protection of civil rights. Calls for legislative action in response to the suicides of bullied gay youth follow the discursive history of hate crime legislation, particularly the 2009 Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which was the first federal legislation to recognize gender, gender-identity, and sexuality as categories for hate crimes. This legislation memorialized the 1998 murders of Shepard and Byrd, formally connected racial and homophobic violence, and created a framework for public dialogue about hate crimes. Although federal hate crime legislation only applies to felony crimes, elements of the Shepard-Byrd Act have been influential in many state-level hate crime laws as well

as anti-bullying laws; in particular, requirements for systematic reporting and tracking of all bullying incidents to the state, most recently included in New Jersey's 2011 "Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights," resembles the Shepard-Byrd Act's initiation of federal reporting and tracking of hate crimes.

Like the Shepard-Byrd Act, much of the state-level anti-bullying legislation has either formally or informally memorialized bullying victims. Neither Massachusetts nor New Jersey formally name bullying victims in their legislation, but both were associated with highly-publicized youth suicides: the Massachusetts law was passed in response to Phoebe Prince's suicide as well as the April 2009 suicide of 11-year old Carl Walker-Hoover. New Jersey's law, which displaced Massachusetts' title for "the toughest piece of anti-bullying legislation in the country" upon its passage in January 2011, was publicly associated with the September 2010 suicide of Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi (Zhao). Both states follow the lead of other legislation that has more formally memorialized bullying victims: the Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act, proposed in 2011, and Michigan's 2011 "Matt's Safe School Law," which formally honors Matt Epling, who committed suicide in 2002 at the age of 14, are among the most recent.

The bullying of gay and gender non-conforming youth has been at the front of many calls to action against bullying, and rising awareness about the nearly nine out of ten LGBT students who experience bullying at school each year has been a key factor in gaining support for anti-bullying legislation (Kosciw et al). However, while early anti-bullying laws adopted many elements of accepted definitions of bullying within psychological scholarship, more recent policies have exceeded these frameworks in a race to demonstrate tough bullying policies. Psychological definitions of bullying, initially developed by Dan Olweus in the 1980s, distinguish bullying from other youth behavior by emphasizing behavior that is "intentional [and] *repeated*," as well as by emphasizing the presence of imbalances in social power that frequently characterizes bullying situations (Olweus and Limber 125; emphasis added). New Jersey's identification of bullying as a "gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication, whether it be a single incident or a series of incidents" significantly broadens the range of

criminal behaviors youth can be held accountable for, and the law also takes an unprecedented step of requiring schools to report all bullying incidents to the state (Anti-Bullying Rights Act). Although it was revised before final passage, an earlier version of Massachusetts' law required schools to report every instance of bullying directly to the police (Bazelon).

Advocates for LGBT students consistently call for laws that “*enumerate* specifically protected personal traits or characteristics so that all students—regardless of the basis of their victimization—are protected” (Sacks and Salem 151; see also Connolly). Such laws and policies are understood as the best way to address the hostile and often violent school environments that many gay youth face, and have been linked to lower rates of bullying among targeted youth (Connolly 250). However, these enumerations have also been among the most controversial and most difficult elements of anti-bullying legislation to enact. According to a Department of Education study, the enumeration of specifically protected groups frequently targeted for bullying, as well as provisions for mental health and other supportive services for victims, are only addressed in approximately one-third (thirty-seven percent) of state laws (Stuart-Cassel xiii-xv). Michigan's “Matt's Law” has been one of the most recent targets of conservative resistance to specific protections for LGBT and other targeted groups in anti-bullying legislation. Michigan's initial bill included a provision that permitted harassment by teachers and students if they could claim that their actions were rooted in a “sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction.” This language was eventually removed from the bill, which ultimately prohibited bullying “without regard to its subject matter” and required school policies that state “all pupils are protected” (Hoffman), but not before the bill received widespread criticism for providing a recipe for legal bullying, as well as support from conservative and religious organizations concerned about pro-gay agendas in anti-bullying actions. The final bill did not include enumerations for populations targeted for bullying. Furthermore, bills with similar language designed to permit harassment and “protect against a political agenda” have been proposed in Arizona and Tennessee (Tennessee HB 1153).

These concerns over the “political agenda” of anti-bullying legislation occupy the intersection of protecting and prosecuting discourses, and

position anti-bullying laws to continue to protect some children's rights at the expense of others. Despite federal support for national legislation, anti-bullying laws remain limited to the state level and thus profoundly uneven. Although the bullying experiences and suicides of LGBT youth have been at the front of anti-bullying activism, state laws and policies have been unable to consistently enumerate specific protections for gender expression and sexual orientation, and therefore consistently protect the educational rights of the most targeted populations from bullying. Of the eight states who passed anti-bullying legislation in 2010, New Jersey, Illinois, New Hampshire, New York, and Washington all provide nonexclusive lists of prohibited bases for bullying that include sexual orientation; however, Massachusetts, Georgia and Mississippi do not (Connolly 260).

Efforts in Michigan, Arizona, Tennessee, and elsewhere have been designed to limit civil rights appeals for gay, lesbian, and other targeted populations, arguing that such protections "make the characteristics of the victim the focus rather than the conduct of the person engaged in harassment, intimidation or bullying" (Tennessee HB 1153). Such proposals feed the continued focus on an ever-widening spectrum of youth behavior, as well as the myth that the targeting of individual behaviors over identities is ideologically and politically neutral. In place of narrower legislation designed to target and protect vulnerable populations, state laws continue to expand definitions of bullying and its growing range of behaviors. Furthermore, even states that do enumerate protections in an effort to change the cultural climate of anti-gay bullying, too often also feed the climate of "upcriming" and youth criminalization in the name of (some) students' safety.

Conclusion

Zero tolerance policies for school violence, particularly when combined with social justice efforts to protect gay students and to memorialize bullying victims, create a perfect storm for broadening the surveillance and prosecution of youth behavior. Understanding the ways in which shifting discourses of youth and criminality intersect social categories of

race, gender, sexuality, and class help us understand the discursive and material consequences of our attempts to protect and prosecute youth and adults from bullying and other violence. The expansion of anti-bullying policies and programs and the specific targeting of girl bullying contribute to wider cultural patterns of “upcriming,” or the increased severity of criminal penalties associated with a particular offense (Chesney-Lind, “Girls and Violence” 5). All youth are experiencing the effects of a growing “youth crime complex” that regulates and criminalizes youth behavior, but the increased criminalization of juveniles disproportionately affects poor and minority youth who, as Henry Giroux argues, “have become especially targeted by modes of social regulation, crime control, and disposability that have become the major prisms that now define many of the public institutions and spheres that govern their lives” (Rios; Giroux 78).

As definitions of misbehavior and criminality expand girls are bearing an increasing proportion of the impact of public focuses on bullying, and so also the anti-bullying laws and policies that unite public and pedagogical regulations of youth behavior. Girls are currently the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population (ABA and NBA 1). From 1985 to 2007 the number of girls’ delinquency cases increased 101 percent, compared to a thirty percent increase for boys (Puzzanchera et al. 12). Much of the rise in girls’ arrests can be attributed to the increased focus on non-violent and lower-level crimes within the juvenile justice system, particularly status offenses, for which girls are consistently detained at higher rates and for longer periods than boys (Chesney-Lind, “Jailing” 61). But girls also most clearly intersect the dual discourses of protection and prosecution that have been the basis of the juvenile justice system from its beginning in this country: current public concerns about mean girls represent a deep social investment in saving middle-class white girls from themselves and their peers, but there is no such investment in protecting poor and minority girls from harsh juvenile and criminal justice policies. However, we should make no mistake that “mean girl” hype and the increased criminalization of all youth, particularly minority youth, are connected through expanded surveillance of youth behaviors and expanded targeting of girls and girl culture.

The public visibility of white bullying victims has created an accompanying public erasure of poor and minority experiences of bullying, as well as a denial of the ways in which bullying acts within larger systems of race and class oppression. Costly bullying prevention programs remain focused on predominantly white schools while steep, zero tolerance school violence policies disproportionately criminalize poor and minority students (Hong; Mukherjee; Talbott et al.). Violence at schools with predominantly racial minorities is rarely characterized within bullying frameworks, and more often attributed to other social factors, including gang violence or black-on-black crime (Hong). These schools often adopt the most punitive school violence policies without the protective discourses and preventive resources available to their wealthier and whiter counterparts.

As the current bullying crisis shifts conceptualizations of what and who represents a threat to safety, it also demonstrates the ways in which rhetorics of injury and recognition circulate within rights claims. The bullying crisis summons existing racialized fears of youth violence, as well as growing public desires to correct the hidden problem of girls' aggression and social justice commitments to making anti-gay violence in schools more visible. However, as anti-bullying policies and legislation make acts of violence among girls and against LGBT youth more visible, they have obscured the inequalities within social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality that continue to produce youth violence. Zero tolerance, anti-bullying, and other criminalizing policies have been premised on the need to protect our nation's youth—often depicted through stories of suburban white girls persecuted by other suburban white girls. And yet our policies and practices make clear that minority youth, particularly girls, remain outside these rights, bearing the brunt of our criminalizing policies and pedagogies.

Bullying representations and policies must address the complex relationship between social inequality and bullying, including the extent to which inequalities within social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality continue to produce violence, as well as the ways in which social categories continue to frame which acts of violence become visible. As anti-bullying policies and legislation grow more successful in making anti-gay and other targeted violence more visible, we must also

pay attention to the extent to which the increasing regulation and criminalization of all youth, but particularly poor and minority youth, is made invisible. As changing discourses of youth criminality and violence make visible the experiences of certain classes of youth, they prosecute and make less visible the experiences of Others.

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