



LET HER
LEARN

STOPPING SCHOOL PUSHOUT
Overview and Key Findings



ABOUT THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER

The National Women's Law Center is a non-profit organization that has worked for more than 40 years to expand opportunities for women and their families, with a major emphasis on education and employment opportunities, women's health and reproductive rights, and family economic security.

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OVERVIEW AND KEY FINDINGS

Girls across the country are being pushed out of school as a result of educational barriers including discriminatory discipline, harassment and sexual violence, and the failure to recognize and address trauma. In particular, after the 2016 presidential election, there was a marked increase across in incidents of harassment triggered by hate, with more than 40 percent occurring in elementary and secondary schools or colleges.¹ Many girls face overlapping forms of discrimination on the basis of sex, race, national origin, disability, gender identity and/or sexual orientation. For example, the National Women's Law Center's 2017 Let Her Learn Survey² of 1,003 girls ages 14-18 shows that being called a racial slur is a common experience shared by all girls of color, with one third to more than two in five of them saying they have had this experience (Asian and Pacific Islander girls reported the highest rates), compared to just over one eighth of white girls.³ The Let Her Learn Survey also reveals that more than 1 in 5 girls (21 percent) have been sexually assaulted,⁴ with LGBTQ girls⁵ reporting even higher rates. Widening the lens, almost 1 in 3 girls (31 percent) reported experiencing either sexual assault or other violence.⁶

These traumatic experiences not only affect girls' mental and physical health, but also their ability to concentrate, feel safe, and stay and do well in school. And if girls do not graduate, they pay a high price. Compared to boys, girls who do not graduate from high school are more likely to be unemployed, to earn low wages if they have jobs, and to depend on public support programs to take care of themselves and their families. Yet despite the obstacles they face, girls are resilient and optimistic about their future, and many see themselves as leaders.

Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout is a series of reports that centers the experiences of the following groups of girls, examining the educational barriers they face and offering recommendations to address them:

- Girls who have suffered harassment and sexual violence
- Girls who are pregnant and parenting
- Girls of color
- Girls involved in the juvenile justice system
- Girls in foster care
- Girls who have experienced homelessness
- Girls with disabilities
- LGBTQ girls

METHODOLOGY

for Let Her Learn Survey and Focus Groups:

To better understand what healthy and safe schools look like for all girls, the National Women's Law Center collaborated with Lake Research Partners to conduct a study of girls from January 5-19, 2017. The study included an online survey of 1,003 girls ages 14-18 nationwide. Black, Latinas, Asian/Pacific Islander girls, Native American girls, and LGBTQ girls were oversampled.⁷ The data were weighted by age, race, and census region to reflect the actual proportions of the population. Oversamples were weighted down to reflect their proportions in the population. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%. The margin of error is higher among subgroups. The study also included six focus groups on barriers facing girls who are survivors of sexual assault and girls who are either currently pregnant or those who are parenting children. The focus groups were conducted in Washington, D.C., Chicago, IL, and Atlanta, GA. The focus group guide and nationwide survey were reviewed by Schulman Institutional Review Board to ensure they protected the well-being of all girls involved in the study.



Girls Report Facing Multiple Barriers to Succeeding in School

The Let Her Learn Survey identified a number of obstacles that may make it difficult for girls to achieve academic success (**Appendix A**). For example:

- Almost 1 in 3 girls (31 percent) report experiencing either sexual assault or other violence.
- More than 1 in 5 girls (21 percent) report being sexually assaulted, defined as being kissed or touched without their consent. This is virtually the same as the widely reported rate of sexual assault among women in college. Girls who have experienced trauma may find it difficult to concentrate in school, trust adults and teachers, and may experience disturbing memories or thoughts of the past.
- More than 2 in 3 girls (67 percent) report experiencing symptoms related to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Traumatic events can leave girls feeling unsafe and like they lack control. Some withdraw and isolate themselves, suffer from cognitive changes, or have other emotional challenges.
- Nearly 1 in 7 girls (14 percent) report being absent from school because they felt they would be unsafe there or on their way to school. If girls are being harassed or assaulted at school, they may decide it is not worth the risk to their safety and may skip school.
- Nearly 1 in 9 girls (11 percent) has experienced homelessness at some point in her life. Not having a fixed place to live is traumatic for many reasons and presents a number of educational challenges as well – for example, lack of a stable or safe place to do homework.

“I feel they teach girls to cover their selves but they don’t teach boys to respect women. They don’t teach boys to respect girls. They don’t teach boys to keep your hands to yourself or to always ask for consent. They don’t teach boys that. They teach us how to avoid it and that to me is kind of like they blame us and slut shaming and I don’t like that at all.” —NWLC Focus Group Participant

“I’m the only person pregnant in my whole school so like all eyes be on me... There’s a lot of rumors... it’s kind of hard.” —*NWLC Focus Group Participant*

Different groups of girls report experiences that are distinct from girls overall, identifying unique barriers to succeeding in school. For example:

- Fear of deportation looms large among girls of color: 55 percent of Latina girls, 38 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander girls, and 30 percent of Black girls worry about a friend or family member being deported.
- More than half of all girls who are pregnant and parenting (51 percent) reported feeling that other students did not want them at school, and 38 percent of these girls said their teachers did not want them at school.
- Girls who have experienced homelessness are about twice as likely (41 percent) as girls overall (21 percent) to report that they have been kissed or touched without their consent, and more than twice as likely (35 percent) as girls overall (14 percent) to report that they had been absent because they felt unsafe at, or on their way to and from, school.
- Girls who are survivors of sexual assault are more than twice as likely (37 percent) as girls overall (15 percent) to report being hurt or injured on purpose by a family member.

Girls also identified many things that make it hard for them to go to school. The largest barrier girls pointed to was not having access to the courses they want, with a majority of girls (51 percent) reporting that as a problem. About 1 in 3 (33 percent) girls said not having access to a career center or counselor who helps with career planning made it hard to go to school. If girls are not able to take classes that are relevant to them or are not getting the guidance they need to further their education, they may lose motivation and stop attending school.⁸

Recommendations from Girls for Helping Them Succeed in School

Despite the barriers that girls face to succeeding in school, they are optimistic and hopeful about themselves and their opportunities. An overwhelming majority of girls feel like their future looked positive (80 percent),⁹ and more than 2 in 5 girls (42 percent) see themselves as leaders. Many girls who responded to the Let Her Learn Survey said they were somewhat or very interested in a 2-year college (52 percent), 4-year college (86 percent), or graduate school (67 percent).

While girls seem to feel positively about their abilities and are motivated to continue their education, they highlighted a number of steps schools could take to help them succeed (**Appendix B**):

- 91 percent of girls want help applying to college.
- 90 percent of girls want their schools to create graduation plans designed for them.
- 79 percent of girls want to be encouraged to take classes in math and science.

When girls were asked to identify just one thing they would change about their schools, many said they wanted better class offerings and requirements, and more and higher quality teachers. Girls also expressed interest in taking classes related to coding or science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

Girls also revealed how schools can help them overcome many of the barriers they face. For example, they want teachers to recognize signs of trauma or mental illness (83 percent), they want schools to protect them from bullying and to deal with it immediately if it occurs (79 percent), and they want access to crisis counselors (77 percent). Substantial numbers of girls who have experienced homelessness, girls who are survivors of sexual assault, and LGBTQ girls report that these solutions would help schools do better by girls.

The recommendations in the *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout* reports echo these solutions identified by girls and expand upon them. Key recommendations from the reports include:

- Policymakers should engage a diverse set of girls in the process of crafting solutions to the educational barriers they face. (One way of doing so is to create youth advisory committees like the Young Women's Initiatives, first launched in New York City.¹⁰)
- The U.S. Department of Education, as well as state and local governments, should engage in vigorous enforcement of the civil rights laws to protect girls from discrimination that interferes with their ability to access educational opportunities—in particular Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (prohibiting sex discrimination); Title VI of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964 (prohibiting race discrimination); Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (prohibiting discrimination based on disability); and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (requiring schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities).

- Policymakers should require and schools should provide all members of their school communities with mandatory, culturally responsive, gender responsive, and trauma-informed training on bullying, harassment and sexual violence and how to identify and support sexual violence and trafficking survivors. Schools should also provide survivors with accommodations (as required by federal law) and ensure that they have adequate staff, including crisis counselors, to provide students with mental health services or refer to community-based services as needed.
- Schools should work with girls—particularly girls who may miss school due to harassment and sexual violence, homelessness, involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, or pregnancy and parenting—to create individualized reenrollment and graduation plans, and should utilize accessible technology and other programs such as homebound instruction to allow students to work remotely if necessary.
- Policymakers should require and states and schools should provide training to decision makers—including educators, police, prosecutors, and judges—regarding implicit bias; the role that stereotypes play in decision making; the prevalence of trauma among girls; and how girls face overlapping discrimination based on race, gender, disability, LGBTQ status and other characteristics.

“When you are going through something... I know personally I start to shut down... it would be nice to have someone to go to talk about that.” —NWLC Focus Group Participant
who is a survivor of sexual assault

One girl said that her dream is to “empower women” and to “make women feel good about themselves.” She also said “when a woman feels confident and she feels she doesn’t have to do certain things to be accepted” is what it means to feel good about herself. —NWLC Focus Group Participant

Girls' voices in this important discussion have been largely absent thus far—but we can change that—and by listening to them we can create healthy and safe schools for all students.

SPOTLIGHT ON PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Many of the recommendations in the *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout* reports highlight personalized learning practices that can help address some of the barriers girls face to succeeding in school. While there is no single definition of personalized learning, it generally includes the following elements: “(1) systems and approaches that accelerate and deepen student learning by tailoring instruction to each student’s individual needs, skills, and interests; (2) a variety of rich learning experiences that collectively prepare students for success in the college and career of their choice; and (3) teachers’ integral role in student learning: designing and managing the learning environment, leading instruction, and providing students with expert guidance and support to help them take increasing ownership of their learning.”¹¹

Several recommendations made by girls themselves in the Let Her Learn Survey—providing them with more of the classes they want, designing graduation plans specifically for them, encouraging them to take classes in math and science, and helping them cope with trauma that interferes with learning—highlight the need to personalize learning environments to address the various challenges they face. In addition, recommendations in the *Let Her Learn* reports echo and expand upon what the girls said. For example, the reports include suggestions for schools to provide girls with more flexibility in how, when and where they learn, which would especially help girls who are absent from school because they do not feel safe there, girls who are changing schools frequently due to homelessness or changes in foster care placements, and girls who are pregnant or parenting.

Appendix A. Selected Girls' Experiences								
Experience	Overall	Black	Latina	Asian or Pacific Islander	Native American	Girls Who Have Experienced Homelessness	Survivors of Sexual Assault ¹²	LGBTQ
Has experienced symptoms of PTSD	67%	61%	73%	71%	62%	86%	91%	83%
Has had trouble concentrating and staying focused in school	46%	35%	48%	50%	61%	71%	68%	61%
Someone has used a racial slur against them	22%	32%	34%	46%	45%	38%	38%	30%
Has been kissed or touched without their consent	21%	22%	24%	13%	23%	41%	95%	38%
Has been hurt or injured on purpose by a family member	15%	19%	19%	16%	16%	37%	37%	27%
Has been absent from school because they felt they would be unsafe at school or on way to school	14%	9%	15%	7%	23%	35%	30%	25%
Has been harassed because of their name or family's country of origin	13%	18%	24%	25%	14%	32%	28%	20%
Has been homeless or lived with another family	11%	19%	12%	4%	32%	100%	23%	18%

Source: National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey, Conducted by Lake Research Partners (2017).

Appendix B. Selected Solutions on How to Make Schools Better for Girls								
Solution	Overall	Black	Latina	Asian or Pacific Islander	Native American	Girls Who Have Experienced Homelessness	Survivors of Sexual Assault	LGBTQ
Help me apply to college	91%	87%	94%	98%	92%	95%	94%	91%
Give me opportunities for extra credit or to make up lost or incomplete work	91%	87%	92%	96%	86%	96%	95%	92%
Create a graduation plan specially designed for me	90%	87%	91%	94%	93%	92%	91%	91%
Train teachers and staff to recognize signs of trauma or mental illness	83%	78%	90%	87%	86%	91%	91%	90%
Protect me from bullying and deal with it immediately if it occurs	79%	74%	81%	83%	77%	84%	86%	84%
Encourage me to take classes in math and science	79%	75%	82%	81%	85%	77%	81%	80%
Share information about how I can report discrimination and harassment	77%	75%	78%	82%	73%	82%	86%	83%
Provide a crisis counselor	77%	71%	79%	84%	76%	83%	89%	82%

Source: National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey, Conducted by Lake Research Partners (2017). Percentages reflect girls who said the solution would help a little, help somewhat, or help a lot.



- 1 Southern Poverty Law Center, Hatewatch, "Update: Incidents of Hateful Harassment Since Election Day Now Number 701" (Nov. 18, 2016), *available at* <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/18/update-incidents-hateful-harassment-election-day-now-number-701>.
- 2 Methodology: To better understand what healthy and safe schools look like for all girls, the National Women's Law Center collaborated with Lake Research Partners to conduct a study of girls from January 5-19, 2017. The study included an online survey of 1,003 girls ages 14-18 nationwide. Black, Latinas, Asian/Pacific Islander girls, Native American girls, and LGBTQ girls were oversampled. The data were weighted by age, race, and census region to reflect the actual proportions of the population. Oversamples were weighted down to reflect their proportions in the population. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%. The margin of error is higher among subgroups. The study also included six focus groups on barriers facing girls who are survivors of sexual assault and girls who are either currently pregnant or those who are parenting children. The focus groups were conducted in Washington, D.C., Chicago, IL, and Atlanta, GA. The focus group guide and nationwide survey were reviewed by Schulman Institutional Review Board to ensure they protected the well-being of all girls involved in the study.
- 3 National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey. The survey found that 46 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander girls, 45 percent of Native American girls, 34 percent of Latina girls and 32 percent of Black girls said someone used a racial slur against them compared to 13 percent of white girls.
- 4 Sexual assault was defined in the survey as being kissed or touched without their consent.
- 5 The Let Her Learn Survey asked respondents about their current gender identity, allowing them to select from male, female, transgender male, transgender female, gender queer or gender nonconforming, or other. The survey also asked respondents about their sexual orientation, allowing them to select from heterosexual or straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual/biromantic, asexual, not sure, or other. Any data describing the experiences of LGBTQ girls reflects responses from those who self-identified their gender to be female or transgender female and those who self-identified their sexual orientation to be anything except heterosexual or straight.
- 6 This data point includes girls who say they have experienced at least one of the following: have been hurt or injured on purpose by someone they were dating or going out with; have been hurt or injured on purpose by a family member; have been kissed/touched when they did not want to; have been physically force to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to; or have been forced to have sex in exchange for money or gifts.
- 7 The survey asked respondents to indicate their race as white, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, multiracial, or other. Respondents could select all options that applied to them. "Black" is used to refer to girls who self-identified as "Black/African American" and "Latina" is used to refer to girls who self-identified as "Hispanic/Latino."
- 8 Responses to barriers include girls who said the barrier was a minor barrier, somewhat of a barrier, or a major barrier to going to school.
- 9 Includes girls who said they felt their future looked positive more often than not or they felt it occasionally in the past month.
- 10 See Young Women's Initiative, "New York City Must Support Every Young Woman," *available at* <http://www.shewillbe.nyc/>.
- 11 John F. Pane et al., *Continued Progress: Promising Evidence on Personalized Learning* (Nov. 2015), 2-3, *available at* http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1300/RR1365/RAND_RR1365.pdf
- 12 Girls who are survivors of sexual assault are defined as those who responded yes to at least one of the following: 1. I have been kissed or touched when I did not want to; 2. I have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when I did not want to; 3. I have been forced to have sex in exchange for money or gifts.



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