

Project Noir



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Cleveland is Failing Black Women





In early 2020, right before the Covid-19 pandemic began, and racial unrest became a national conversation, Brentin Mock of *Bloomberg City Lab* *publicized*¹ a ranking of American cities based on livability metrics for Black Women.

CLEVELAND RANKED DEAD LAST.

While we have invested millions in equity and inclusion conversations and forums within the region, the metrics refuse to budge and conversations remain stale.

Cleveland boasts three internationally-renowned healthcare hubs, but Black Women living next door to major anchor institutions suffer from poor healthcare access, experiences and are dying at alarming and preventable rates.

The Industrial Midwest is known for a strong work ethic, entrepreneurial grit, and neighborly spirit - but Black Women are routinely denied the opportunity to gain access and influence within the workplace.

Our higher education institutions attract scholars discussing social justice, yet inside those classrooms, Black Women are conspicuously underrepresented and marginalized.

The metrics paint a picture of stark inequity, but they fail to answer the two most obvious questions:

- As a Black Woman, what is it like to live in a city that experts agree is the worst place for you?
- How can individuals and anchor institutions create tangible solutions?



1. Mock, Brentin. What “Livability” Looks like for Black Women. 9 Jan. 2020.



THE URGENCY

Without tangible equity progress, we will hemorrhage talented Black minds and continue a long-term legacy of decline and disinvestment.

If there is any American city where we should attempt to solve problems of exclusion and inequality, Cleveland would be the best place to start.

- *Cleveland was ranked ² the poorest big city in America*
- *The Cleveland job market was hit worse than most American cities due to COVID-19 ³*

Enlightened Solutions believes that since Cleveland is an epicenter of inequality in America, this is the best place to create solutions. By centering Black Women, we are focusing on the most marginalized individuals in our region. Continued systemic marginalization will have catastrophic sustainability, socio-economic and environmental consequences for our region. Inclusion of Black Women within all industries is the key to our interconnected futures.

By centering Black Women, we are focusing on the most marginalized individuals in our region.



2. Ohio Capital Journal Staff, "Cleveland now ranks as the poorest big city in the United States", Sept. 22, 2020

3. Exner, Rich. Cleveland Metro Job Market Hit Worse than Most during Coronavirus, Cleveland State University Study Finds. 2 Sept. 2020.

THE METHODOLOGY

Enlightened Solutions created and dispersed a survey focused on understanding the experiences of Black Women in Cleveland. We invested in two local Black Women influencers [CourtneyCoversCleveland](#) and [Lemon-Love Lifestyle](#), to assist in social media promotion and media appearances speaking directly to a multiplicity of Black Women separated by social distancing due to COVID-19. With additional stakeholders, civic partnerships and a snowball-sampling approach, we were able to expand our outreach, in spite of physical separation due to COVID-19.

The response to Project Noir was overwhelming. 450 Black Women responded providing almost 1,000 accounts of frustration, isolation, marginalization, abuse, discrimination, and harassment across Northeast Ohio. In addition, we conducted private video interviews with survey participants who were interested in exploring their experiences at a deeper level.

Project Noir is not designed to prove or disprove disparate treatment of Black Women.

We utilized a survey framework based in Phenomenological Research, which is the study of lived experiences. We know these accounts to be true because of their inherent value, coupled with widely-available existing bodies of research which addresses systemic racism, misogyny and the compounding *misogynoir*⁴ that Black Women navigate through each day.

It is important to note while Project Noir participants were not privy to the answers or stories of any of the other participants, their experiences mirror one another in terms of common tactics for marginalization, insults, common pain points, and shared frustrations. In fact, the most common phrase utilized by participants was “a lack of grace” for the humanity and experiences of being a Black Women, within the healthcare, education and workplaces; this shared experience provides internal reliability to our research, as Project Noir participants were able to provide validation through commonalities.

4. Misogyny directed towards black women where race and gender both play roles in bias.





Black Women Know What is Best For Them

The script of harassment, discrimination and alienation Black Women are subjected to in Cleveland, is often predictable.

There is significant racial and gender-based illiteracy on the part of our institutions and leaders, which serves as a direct contributor to the extreme marginalization of Black Women in our community.

We cannot fix this problem if we continue to refuse to look at it directly. The stories that follow are not easy to hear. There are stories of assault, medical malpractice, dismissal, termination, exclusion, harassment, and targeted mistreatment. We designed this project to center the voices of Black Women. We encouraged opportunities to connect to counseling, additional conversations, and advocacy services to every woman we spoke to. We cannot fix this problem if we continue to refuse to look at it directly.

This report is split into three major areas of discussion: workplaces, healthcare and education. These areas were identified as major hotspots of inequality. Explore each to understand the harmful, yet prevalent, challenges Black Women face within Northeast Ohio.

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Workplace Workplaces





Cleveland consistently ranks extremely low on workplace inclusion metrics which has a direct affect on the economic sustainability and stability of our region. With a surplus of available, affordable housing, world-class education, convenient access to the eastern seaboard, and an active social and entertainment scene, Cleveland should be a major attractor for young, working talent. However, our national reputation as a region with heavily entrenched exclusion of Black Women, is one of the biggest barriers to attracting talent and innovation to our region.

Political movements, buying patterns, marketing and outreach strategies are all shifting to represent the interests of diverse groups. Organizations that get ahead of the curve now, will be better positioned to capitalize on these fundamental changes, attract talent, and retain brilliant individuals. It is imperative that organizations in our region prioritize diversity and inclusion as fundamental rather than additive in order to build an economy that can withstand these global shifts.

For tax problems, you hire an accountant. It's time to do the same with equity and inclusion.

During our discussions with Project Noir participants, we heard first-hand how diversity and inclusion efforts by local institutions, while sometimes well-intentioned, **have been more damaging and stressful for Black Women than it has been helpful.** Many organizations began implementing changes and completing work internally before consulting any professionals or experts on best practices.

With the backdrop of 2020's racial unrest, the majority of our participants shared their frustration with being called upon to educate members of leadership, forcibly placed on workplace diversity and equity committees without (financial and external) resources, power, all while their experiences were heavily scrutinized by leadership and colleagues who do not share their intersections.

If there is one place in America where we should concentrate on equalizing opportunity, Cleveland is the perfect place to start. **Cleveland has the opportunity to go from the bottom to the top.** If we can change course now, we could solve problems facing not only our region but the country as a whole.

**FOR TAX
PROBLEMS,
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PAY + BENEFITS

In many ways, pay and benefits may seem like a simple inequality problem to solve — a matter of concrete numbers and figures. Most Project Noir participants shared their disheartened experiences with unequal pay, but for Black Women in the workplace, it is not as simple as ensuring equal pay and access to health insurance. Many of the frustrations shared by Black Women include access to on the job perks and informal advantages.

Benefits like access to training opportunities, mentorship, flexible scheduling, sick time utilization, and social invitations are all “perks” that are not fully regulated by a central system. Black Women are severely disadvantaged by these “informal benefits” in day to day application. In areas that are less measurable and less regulated, Black Women are held at arm’s length and continually excluded.

Black Women in Cleveland are routinely passed over for promotions, paid less, asked to train their counterparts, excluded from training and opportunities for growth, and penalized for utilizing benefits at an alarming rate in our community.

Many participants even questioned whether these issues were racially motivated or gendered. But after hearing and reviewing hundreds of stories, a **clear pattern of reduced access to all job benefits, — formal or informal — emerged.**

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ORGANIZATIONS

- Complete regular audits of pay differences between groups overall, not only within specific positions. Be prepared to proactively talk about disparities and how best to close gaps through external assistance.
- Train all managers and supervisors on administering benefits fairly with a specific focus on informal benefits.
- Revisit these values often with staff and professional trainers. Repetition is key to change.

INDIVIDUALS

- Ask your employer: What is the retention rate for diverse employees (individuals of color, LGBTQ employees, disabled and neurodiverse)? What is the statistic in comparison to white employees?
- Ask your employer: How do we ensure that diverse employees feel included and that their voices are influential?
- Ask your Employers: Have we invested in outside trainers for inclusion and retention efforts?

SELF-PROTECTION

- Use your interviews to vet employers. Ask them if they review pay differences.
- Keep track of instances where benefits and/or pay are distributed unfairly.
- Trust your judgment. If you feel that something is unfair based on your race or gender, you are the person best situated to judge that.



HIGHER STANDARDS, HARSHER PUNISHMENT

Black Women expressed a constant pressure to be perfect as they were acutely aware of how little grace is extended to them in the event of a slip-up or mistake.

43% of Project Noir respondents have reported harassment or abuse to their employer. **Of those that reported, employers were more likely to fire or discipline the reporter than the abuser.** What's more, Black Women in workplaces across our community are experiencing astronomical levels of *imposter syndrome*⁵ and physical stress as they attempt to adhere to standards that are not required of their counterparts.

Whether it is a function of unconscious bias or concerted targeting, Black Women in Cleveland are without any cushion in the workplace.

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5. Impostor syndrome describes high-achieving individuals who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalize their accomplishments and have persistent self-doubt.



ISOLATION + PROFESSIONALISM

Black Women are often placed in situations where they are the only Black Woman in their department or team, an experience that is highly isolating. Conversely, many organizations appear to recruit and employ Black individuals only for specific teams or positions. Generally, these positions are more isolated from opportunity than more balanced teams.

It is worth noting here that the standards of "perfection" and "professionalism" are ideals that are derived from white, cis-gendered, heteronormative, able-bodied, neurotypical men. These standards are often asserted as 'neutral' but in reality, are derived from a time and place that did not include diverse people. Anything that Black Women do that doesn't fit these ideals is harshly criticized and cited as unprofessional.

Handbooks across our city ban natural hairstyles for Black Women. Black Women are forbidden from or encouraged to "neutralize" the hair that grows from their head. We received story after story of Black Women being told their hairstyles are "unprofessional."

They are often told that they need to "tone themselves down" and are frequently referred to as angry and aggressive when they offer any protest.

This is an insidious type of racialized and gendered targeting. **Black Women are subjected to standards that were designed to exclude them, while being told it is only 'professional.'**

Black Women are expected to anticipate how they will be perceived. Many participants shared the stress that comes along with these impossible standards and the constant requirement to be calm, collected, and approachable.

In Cleveland, Black Women's bodies are criticized constantly. Hair is critiqued, Black Women are instructed to dress more conservatively, to avoid bright colors and patterns. They are told to hide their accent and speak "properly."

Black Women are expected to anticipate how they will be perceived.

74%

of respondents said they felt they had been passed over for a job or promotion they were qualified for

65%

of respondents have been excluded from important meetings relevant to their jobs.

77%

were subjected to inappropriate comments about their features including hair/face/etc.

76%

have been paid less than coworkers in a similar position

54%

have been retaliated against when they objected to inappropriate comments

47%

of respondents have been placed on teams with a majority of Black employees while other teams are majority white

81%

of respondents have been placed on a team with no other Black employees





Healthcare

Healthcare

MISOGYNOIR IS ROUTINE IN LOCAL DOCTOR OFFICES

Cleveland prides itself on being a healthcare innovation hub. Our region boasts several major providers, and families from around the world come to Cleveland seeking expert healthcare intervention and quality care. **Lives are saved in Cleveland every single day - except for the lives of Black Women**

Black Women are routinely ignored gravely and disregarded in life-threatening manners from medical professionals.

In addition and with alarming regularity, local healthcare professionals refuse to complete necessary tests for Black Women or pressure anxious patients into invasive or medically unnecessary procedures and tests all while accusing Black female patients in their care of fabricating symptoms.

Misogynoir, the intersection of anti-Black female racism and sexism in our local healthcare systems, is literally killing Black Women in Cleveland. Until our healthcare systems confront and eradicate it, Black Women in Cleveland will continue being harmed.

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This excerpt from a 2019 medical textbook, asserts as “true” dangerous and offensive stereotypes about Black People, including that they “exaggerate pain levels.” This material should be alarming for any person seeking quality medical care, and is indicative of the information and casual comments medical professionals have likely been exposed to by some training superiors.

A 2016 study⁶ found that “half of white medical trainees believe such myths as Black people have thicker skin or less sensitive nerve endings than white people.”

Current medical treatment for Black Women, is woefully inadequate and is a direct contributor to a dereliction of premium care.

6. Janice A. Sabin (PhD, MSW), “How we Fail Black Patients in Pain”, Jan 6, 2020



Dereliction of Care

Put yourself in these shoes. You're a 35 year old Black Woman living in Cleveland, and are experiencing intense lower back pain unrelieved by over the counter medication. Concerned, you schedule a doctor's appointment which sacrifices paid time off, gas, copayments, and medical copay.

When the doctor enters, you answer their preliminary questions about sexual health and history until finally explaining the purpose of your visit - persistent and debilitating lower back pain. You detail that you have never experienced this kind of pain before and do not remember injuring yourself. Instead of empathy, your physician responds, "you're probably focusing on it too much, I doubt it's that painful." Before their unceremonious exit, they complete a cursory review of your chart, commenting, "it looks like you're a little overweight. You should focus on losing weight and changing your diet."

The door slams, you're alone, in pain and without a remedy.

You go home, still in pain, and without any insight. But you take their curt advice. After losing 20 pounds, the pain is still there. The initial process is repeated with a new doctor and after examining your back and running tests, you are diagnosed with a slipped disc. A highly painful and easily diagnosable issue.

You've endured months of pain, sleepless nights, changes in your diet and exercise routine, lost paid time off, paid a copay, all for no reason other than that your first doctor looked at you and determined your concerns were inconsequential.

For an alarming number of Black Women in Cleveland, this is the story of seeking medical help. Too many doctors in Cleveland routinely gaslight their Black patients, telling women that their health issues are minor. An alarming number of survey participants shared that their healthcare professional refused to provide any type of treatment or testing services.

When confronted with health conditions that require some diagnostic services, many doctors in Cleveland reject any responsibility for identifying the root cause and instead tell patients to lose weight or focus on their diet, even when the symptoms presented do not relate to weight or diet.

While some may argue that these barriers are common across identity groups, we must remember that Black Women's healthcare outcomes are reliably poorer than other groups due to a persistent lack of care and access.

WOMEN'S HEALTH IS MORE THAN SEXUAL HEALTH

Women's health is not just sexual and reproductive health. Healthcare concerns are disregarded, while professionals hyper-focus sexuality and reproduction.

Project Noir participants shared narratives of being subjected to unwanted, invasive and/or unnecessary sexual health exams that were often unrelated to why the patient had visited. Several respondents included stories of healthcare professionals questioning virginity, performing aggressive exams without consent, and making vulgar comments. Alarming, many participants shared stories of extreme and repetitive pressure to take birth control, (regardless of desired family structure), undergo premature hysterectomies even when other treatment options were available.

Several stories border on sexual assault, with reports of doctors with predatory hands, exams that expand without consent, and doctors who equate medical tools to the male anatomy.

Accounts shared by Project Noir participants paint a picture of a healthcare landscape that simultaneously disbelieves and sexualizes Black Women, even as their bodies are in medical emergency. The unvarnished truth is - for many Black Women in Cleveland, exam rooms are dangerous and isolating places, with medical professionals more focused on controlling and investigating sexuality than responding to legitimate and life-threatening healthcare emergencies.



IMPROPER PAIN MANAGEMENT

Black people in general are given less access to pain management across multiple areas of practice.⁷ A recent study found that Black patients are actually 40% less likely to receive pain management during an emergency room visit than white patients.⁸ *Pain management is a lifesaving component of medical care*⁹ and is a key sensory indicator of general healthcare problems.

Across disciplines, there is also an *appalling lack of research into women's health*¹⁰ - women are more likely to be prescribed sedatives than pain relievers when compared to male patients, seemingly focusing on sedation and silencing than management and care. Nevertheless, pain management is regularly dismissed for most American women, thus compounded when adding the intersections of (perceived) race, nationality/ethnicity, socio-economic class and educational attainment. This is an extremely concerning trend that leads directly to a lack of trust in healthcare providers for marginalized communities, including Project Noir survey participants and contributes to foundational lack of trust for women and their families. These experiences were heavily reflected in our research and interviews translating to real-world healthcare issues being brushed aside by healthcare practitioners.

This is an extremely concerning trend that leads directly to a lack of trust in healthcare providers for marginalized communities...



7. Tamayo-Sarver, Joshua H., et al. Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Emergency Department Analgesic Prescription. Dec. 2003.

8. Rapaport, Lisa. Nonwhite Patients Get Less Pain Relief in U.S. Emergency Rooms. 2 July 2019.

9. Katz, Nathaniel. "The Impact of Pain Management on Quality of Life." 1 July 2002.

10. 70% of chronic pain cases affect women, yet 80% of pain studies are conducted on male mice or human men.

41%

of respondents have been told their health issues are not real or made up.

37%

have been pressured to get on Birth Control.

34%

refused medication for pain or pain management.

36%

of respondents have had a provider that refused to provide any treatment at all.

26%

have been subjected to unwelcome comments about their sex life.

60%

spoken down to about their own health or symptoms.

71%

of respondents were told to lose weight or change their diet/exercise routine.

13%

of respondents had been subject to unnecessary pelvic exams. Another 9% report being subjected to unnecessary breast exams.



Education
Education



Education

A FALSE MERITOCRACY, LEADING TO MARGINALIZATION

The American education system has been a focus of civil rights advocacy since the standardization of the teaching profession in the early 1900s. Academic meritocracy has been seen as the “golden ticket” for Black families as an equalizing socio-economic and scholastic opportunity. Especially in the Industrialized North and Midwest, Black American families left the Deep South in search of educational opportunities for future generations during the First and Second Great Migrations.¹¹

In application, our education system has heavily entrenched and codified second-class status of American citizens, especially Black

Women who have been pushed to the margins utilizing *public policy*,¹² *federal legislation*,¹³ *financial access*¹⁴ and other systemic tools, denying them an equal and fair education.

This process has decentralized and reflexively automated race and gender based marginalization in palpable ways, effectively funneling Black Women into systems that do not foster academic growth or mentorship.¹⁵



11. Baran, Cavit, et al. The Great Migration and Educational Opportunity *. 25 Mar. 2021.

12. Kayla Patrick, Adaku Onyeka-Crawford, and Nancy Duchesneau, " 'And They Cared': How to Create Better, Safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color" Aug 20, 2020

13. Sanders, Courtney. "65 Years after Brown v. Board of Education, More Suits over Education Equity." 16 May 2019.

14. Jen Mishory " How Student Debt and the Racial Wealth Gap Reinforce Each Other" Sept 9, 2019

15. Nadia Mitchell, "The Triple Burden: Black Women Leaders in Predominantly White Institutions of Education" 2021



A FALSE MERITOCRACY, LEADING TO MARGINALIZATION

During the American Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s, *the conversation focused intensely on desegregation and equality of public services.*¹⁶ Although desegregation was “legally” accomplished in American K-12 schools in 1954, *American schools are more segregated today than they were then,*¹⁷ with *Cleveland being the most segregated and impoverished city in America in 2021.*¹⁸

For Black Women in Cleveland, true educational parity must include equality in all involved aspects of education. Tangible educational parity expands past the walls of each classroom and is codified within school handbooks and within PTA meetings. Through culturally relevant programmatic offerings, blind grading/ranking discipline patterns, gender-inclusive dress codes, programmatic offerings and more, centering the voices of Black girls and women pursuing education.

Educational reform efforts must proactively identify these hidden traps and formulate concerted and targeted efforts to achieve equality. Cleveland must prioritize informal support structures that interweave education pursuits with access to professors, networking opportunities, career referrals, and other informal benefits and opportunities in post-secondary school.

For Black Women in Cleveland, true educational parity must include equality in all involved aspects of education.



16. Background - Mendez v. Westminster Re-Enactment.” 2011.

17. Sheehan Hannan, “What Happened to Integration?” August 3, 2020

18. Ohio Capital Journal Staff, “Cleveland now ranks as the poorest big city in the United States”, Sept 22, 2020

Cleveland is Extremely Segregated - and Trending Worse

Northeast Ohio is a living testimony to the reality of ⁴white flight and the persistence of 21st Century socio-economic segregation.

Across our community, Black Women shared their educational journeys with us. From preschool to post-graduate, they identified repetitive patterns of *implicit and explicit marginalization* effectuated through both standardized community and education policy and interpersonal practice as well as individual bigotry and bias.¹⁹

In Cleveland, Black women and girls are discouraged, policed, disciplined, belittled, manipulated, and encouraged to think small and aim low. There is a concerning gap between what is seen as publicly available information and opportunity for Black Women. Disparities appear to be rooted in informal components of education. Job leads, available credentials, social connections, and other unofficial networks of support were less accessible for our survey participants. Despite barriers, Black Women prove every single day that they are capable, determined, resilient, and brilliant. We must recognize this uncompromising talent in Cleveland as a sustainability and ingenious asset.

In Cleveland, Black women and girls are discouraged, policed, disciplined, belittled, manipulated, and encouraged to think small and aim low.

19. Nunley, Courtney. "Hair Politics: How Discrimination against Black Hair in Schools Impacts Black Lives." 3 May 2019.

STEERING + DISCOURAGEMENT

Many stories shared a general theme of being "steered" throughout their educational career. Professionals meant to help their students purposefully and/or inadvertently failed to share important information and actively discouraged Black Women from desired career trajectory.

There are several subtle identifiable forms of this behavior:

- Steering: when individuals tasked with guiding students instead steer Black women and girls into unfitting professions lacking resources or advancement.
- Discouragement: Telling Black female students that they are unlikely to succeed in a profession or it would be too challenging for them.
- Refusal to Teach: Educational professionals refusing to meet individually, gaslighting and degrading Black Femme students, being harsher when grading, or discouraging them from opportunities.

These forms of steering lead many impressionable young, Black female students to take a different route than one originally planned.

Many Project Noir survey participants



Many Project Noir survey participants only realized that educational gaslighting and steering was taking place weeks to years after the fact.

only realized that educational gaslighting and steering was taking place weeks to years after the fact. For many, steering and discouragement was difficult to immediately process, thus imbuing lasting *imposter syndrome*²⁰ questioning choices and feeling misguided and undervalued. .

48% of our survey participants had been specifically discouraged from S.T.E.M. classes that were imperative to completing their career goals. In an industry with severe under-representation, this dejection continues to hinder Black Women from achieving professional success and participating in economic opportunities, and also leaves the ability of American technology companies to understand and implement the wide-breadth of creativity of Black female tech employees.

20. Dena M. Bravata (MD, MS), Sharon A. Watts (MA), Autumn L. Keefer (PhD), "Prevalence, Predictions, and Treatment of Imposter Syndrome: a Systematic Review", April 2020



GRADES, DISCIPLINE, & POLICY

Many Project Noir participants expressed frustration with their grades and grading systems. We noted a pattern of:

- Lower Grades: given lower grades than their colleagues and classmates, including grades on group projects or collaborative work.
- Higher Standards: witnessing different, lower standards for other students. This was often expressed in feedback from educators that docked points or added criticism for issues not identified in the rubric or grading materials.
- Unfair, and Repeated Penalties: Experiencing more frequent penalties with inventive and insidious weapons outside of grading. For example, deadline extensions that were available to other students are unavailable to them, or professors who interact with students outside of class make a point to avoid them.

In addition to grading and punishment, many survey participants have been criticized or penalized for their hair and/or dress.

- 47% of our survey participants had been subjected to comments and punishments for how they dress or wear their hair.

For many Black Women in Cleveland, pursuing their educational goals is a matter of navigating a minefield full of hidden traps and novel methods of marginalization.

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56%

were steered into lower-paying professions rather than urged to pursue their passion.

26%

felt their grades did not fairly represent the quality of their work.

48%

have been discouraged from taking classes in Math and Science.

73%

felt excluded from key educational opportunities.

49%

have been targeted for discipline they felt was unfair.

26%

have been criticized by educational professionals for the way they dress.

Are you ready to stand with Black Women in Cleveland?

3 Ways to Help Black Women in Cleveland



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