

## Stolen innocence: the rapes of little girls during Jim Crow

During the period of legally sanctioned segregation in the U.S., known as the Jim Crow era (roughly 1865 to 1965), the public discussion of “rape” focused on assaults of white women. However, a much more common problem was the raping of Black children, daughters, mothers, and sons by white men— including those with local power and influence (Williamson 1997; Litwack 1998; Talty 2003). According to McGuire (2010), “The rape of [B]lack women by white men continued, often unpunished, throughout the era of Jim Crow ... white men abducted and assaulted [B]lack women at an alarming regularity” (xviii). According to Patricia Hill Collins, “No longer the property of a few White men, African American women [and girls] became sexually available to all White men” (Collins 2005:65).

Nearly 100 in-depth interviews with older African Americans in the U.S. Southeast and Southwest revealed the prevalence of this form of violence. A participant in the Southeast responds to a question about rapes when she was growing up:

There were rapes! If white men see a halfway decent woman, if he wanted her, he went up and just grabbed her and starts doing whatever he wanted to do to her. You know, she would fight, and say no, but he would beat her up, slap her, knock her down, and just, just take her. That was the norm back then for the white man to do. If you just happened to be in an area where they [whites] were it could happen to you. We were basically homebound people, so, we didn't get out much ... . Always “yes sir/no sir, thank you sir” or whatever... never show any attitude or any animosity for all that would lead to was either a beating, rape, or killing. (Southeast, 60's).

Sadly, this woman takes it for granted that Whites would look for the *lack of deference* as an invitation for violence. The rapes of young girls are well documented. The statute of limitations has run out on the events from the 1950's, etc., so they're not open for prosecution in a legal sense. Suggested replacement sentence: "Rapes of young Black girls are well documented."

For example, in 1930, a fourteen-year-old was shot and killed in a restaurant in New Orleans by a white police officer because she resisted his attempts to rape her (Simmons 2009). In 1959, four white male students in the Tallahassee area raped a Black university student at gunpoint. The men reportedly wanted to, “go out and get a nigger girl” (McGuire 2010: 106). In July 1963, nearly 30 Black girls, called “Stolen Girls,” between the ages of 12-15 were arrested and placed in a dilapidated building in Americus, Georgia (Essence 2006) for buying movie tickets. The parents of these Black teenage girls were not notified of the arrest, the location, the physical condition, or the reason why the girls were arrested. During their two-month detention the girls were confined in one room. Some of the girls were reported being raped and sodomized, and at least one 12-year-old was pregnant when she was released two months later in September. The young teenagers were never charged with a crime.

A Southerner in his sixties recalls a rape:

This lady...was going to the sanctified church around the corner ... and she got kidnapped by a white guy and he took her out in the woods and [he] sodomized her and raped her ... . He never served a day in jail ... . She wasn't even married or anything at the time (Southeast, 60's).

The rapes of Black women and girls during Jim Crow were a common occurrence and it compromised their ability to maintain an identity that was important for them before marriage. These events are a part of our history and are on display in contemporary times. The time has come to examine the long-term impact of psychological and physical abuse during Jim Crow. The survivors of the era who survived and resisted deserve redress for the atrocities they endured.

***Ruth Thompson-Miller***  
*University of Dayton, OH, USA*

## **Publication**

["There Were Rapes!": Sexual Assaults of African American Women and Children in Jim Crow.](#)

Thompson-Miller R, Picca LH

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