

NATURAL HAIR DISCRIMINATION

 naacpldf.org/natural-hair-discrimination/



Why is Black hair special?

The exceptional nature of Black hair goes beyond just cultural differences. The elasticity and tight coils of Black hair cause it to have unique needs. The physical attributes make it more susceptible to breakage. It cannot easily be straightened without damaging the hair. Black people often wear “protective hairstyles” like braids, twists, and locs to maintain healthy hair. These hairstyles can be worn for long stretches of time without constant manipulation. The alternative is often to use chemical or heat straighteners that can damage the hair in the short and long term.

Black hair is also an expression of identity and culture. It’s a representation of history and carries deep emotional significance. Historically, Black hair has carried a profound symbolism. Cornrows, locs, twists, afros, bantu knots, and more all have historic connections to Black pride, culture, religion, and history.

Why is Black hair currently in the spotlight?

Black adults, school children and members of the military have long been discriminated against because of their natural hairstyles, such as afros, twists, locs and braids. By penalizing hairstyles that fall outside of Eurocentric norms of beauty, discriminatory grooming policies in schools and workplaces are directly linked to institutional racism.

The work of **The CROWN Act** coalition partners has also brought national attention to the law. For decades, LDF has worked to combat discriminatory policies that target Black hair, and is an ardent proponent of Crown Act legislation.

How does hair discrimination occur in the workplace?

A recent **study** by Michigan State University found that African American women face the highest instances of hair discrimination. They are more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair. The study also determined that 80 percent of African American women felt they needed to switch their hairstyle to align with more conservative standards in order to fit in at work.

A separate **study** by researchers at Duke University found that participants viewed Black hairstyles like afros, twists or braids as less professional. The study determined that Black women with natural hairstyles are less likely to land job interviews than white women or Black women with straightened hair.

How does hair discrimination occur in schools?

Some school policies that ban natural and protective styles are grounds for discipline or removal from school. Because of this, Black students across the country have been asked to cut or straighten their hair to meet dress codes and grooming policies. Some school districts have banned specific Black hairstyles, which prevent students from attending school events like prom, extracurricular and sports activities, and even graduation.

How does hair discrimination impact children?

Black students are more likely to be suspended for discretionary reasons, such as dress code or long hair violations, neither of which have been found to be predictive of student misconduct, according to **researchers** at Princeton University. These punishments place students on a trajectory towards poor academic performance, leading to higher dropout rates, gang involvement, and getting arrested before the age of 21.

Hair discrimination is rooted in systemic racism and erodes trust between students and the education system that is supposed to care for them. Protective styles, locs, headwraps, and durags are not just vital to the protection of Black hair, they are expressions of culture and identity. Discriminating against Black hair reinforces the othering of Black children and is another way that Black identity is policed.

How do Black people alter their hair for majority white spaces?

Since the late 19th century, some Black people who have more tightly curled hair use chemicals that “relax” or “perm” the hair or heated tools like hair irons or hot combs to straighten their hair.

For many Black people, altering the texture of their hair is considered essential to social and economic success and reducing tension. Hair straightening has long been seen as a way to assimilate and make those unfamiliar with Black hair more comfortable with their presence.

What is The CROWN Act?

The CROWN Act, which stands for “Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair,” is a law that prohibits race-based hair discrimination, which is the denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles. It prohibits discrimination based on natural hair style and texture, such as locs, cornrows, twists, braids, Bantu knots, fades, afros, and/or the right to keep hair in an uncut or untrimmed state.”

What is the status of The CROWN Act?

As of June 2021, **13 states** (CA, NY, NJ, VA, CO, WA, MD, CT, NM, DE, NE, NV, OR) and 28 municipalities have signed The CROWN Act or legislation inspired by The CROWN Act into law. Thirty additional states have pre-filed, filed, or intend to introduce the legislation.

Federal legislation was reintroduced in March 2021 in the U.S. House of Representatives (H.R. 2116) by Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ) and in the U.S. Senate (S. 888) by Senator Cory Booker.

Why do we need The CROWN Act? Don't other anti-discrimination laws cover this?

Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act only prohibits employment discrimination on the bases of race, color, religion, national origin, and sex. Other federal laws also create protected classes based on age, disability, pregnancy, familial status, veteran status, and genetic information. Appearance, however, is not a protected characteristic. Federal law only focuses on a person’s immutable – or unchangeable – characteristics.

Despite the legal classification, natural hair discrimination is not appearance bias, but rather a conduit for racial discrimination. The CROWN Act seeks to close gaps in current anti-discrimination legislature.

Where can I find out more about the CROWN Act?

You can find more information about the status and future of hair discrimination legislation at [TheCROWNAct.com](https://www.thecrownact.com). The CROWN Coalition, spearheaded by Dove and Unilever, has created a petition to help end hair discrimination in the workplace and schools.

What can employers and schools do to avoid discriminating against natural hair?

Institutions should review their appearance policies and remove references to specifically-prohibited hairstyles, especially ones that refer to Black hairstyles.

Policies that may seem race-neutral can sometimes have a disproportionate impact on Black hair. For instance, a policy that bans dreadlocks could apply to all employees, but would disproportionately affect Black employees or students. Companies should also educate employees and managers on cultural sensitivity regarding natural hair.

How can I be a good ally?

Allies should be open to learning about hair and other physical attributes that are different from their own. They should be open to stand up against behaviors that penalize a particular group. An ally can call out discrimination or policies that negatively affect Black hair. An ally is often poised to draw more attention to discriminatory issues by not letting the aggrieved person stand on their own and by helping to educate their own communities.