

Florida honors student whose harmless-but-explosive science project led to a felony arrest two years ago celebrated her ultimate vindication at the White House this week. Kiera Wilmot's strange journey went from innocuous experiment to finger-printing at a juvenile detention center to being honored with other students at Astronomy Night with President **Barack Obama**.

Along the way, the arrest of the petite and soft-spoken 19-year-old has become a leading example of overzealous school enforcement, post-911 jitters and what her backers call the increasing criminalization of young people of color. "To this day I still get people who harass me about it and call me a terrorist," Wilmot said at a news conference Tuesday in Washington. "It can be a little tough."

The White House invited her to Astronomy Night not so much because of her science project but because of what she called "the arrest and all the hardships. I am a woman of color who was pushed out of school." Her story is often cited by those who say many schools, especially in Florida, are too quick to suspend or expel students, especially minorities, on exaggerated or false accusations — a phenomenon they call the "school-to-prison pipeline."

"Many of these policies, particularly the ways in which young people are being criminalized, date back to the historical legacy of racism in this country that's pronounced in places like Florida and others," said Thena Robinson-Mock of the Advancement Project, a civil rights advocacy group in Washington.

She cited figures showing that African-Americans in Florida in 2011-12 comprised nearly half — 46 percent — of school-related arrests of girl students.

"Florida has been a location where we have focused a lot of our attention because we know that students there experience some of the highest rates of arrest in the country," Robinson-Mock said. "Even more troubling is that when we look at the number of black girls experiencing suspensions and expulsions, it's off the charts."

Wilmot's travails began at Bartow High School in Polk County two years ago when she mixed toilet-bowl cleaner and aluminum foil in a water bottle as part of a science project. The result was firecracker-like sound, much like a cork popping off a carbonated bottle, that did not hurt anyone or cause damage. Wilmot said she was later pulled out of a classroom, handcuffed, taken to a juvenile detention center and charged with possessing and discharging a destructive device. School officials cited a "zero tolerance" policy designed to secure all students.

She was suspended, expelled and sent to an alternative school where she said she "felt like a criminal." She and her twin sister Kayla, who remained at Bartow High, said they endured taunts from other students that made them cry.

Kiera was later allowed to return to Bartow, and the charges were dropped. While applying for college, she had to check a box saying she had been arrested on felony charges. After some explanation, she was admitted to Florida Polytechnic University in Lakeland, where she studies mechanical engineering.

At the White House science event, she met Ahmed Mohamed, a Texas student who was arrested and suspended from high school for bringing a homemade clock to class that was suspected of being a hoax bomb earlier this year. He and Kiera now bask in widespread support on social media.

"Fortunately in this case, there's a happy ending to the story," Robinson-Mock said. "But for millions of students around the nation, this is not the case."

