

Black boys viewed as older, less innocent than whites, research finds

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Black boys as young as 10 may not be viewed in the same light of childhood innocence as their white peers, but are instead more likely to be mistaken as older, be perceived as guilty and face police violence if accused of a crime, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Children in most societies are considered to be in a distinct group with characteristics such as innocence and the need for protection. Our research found that black boys can be seen as responsible for their actions at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent," said author Phillip Atiba Goff, PhD, of the University of California, Los Angeles. The study was published online in APA's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Researchers tested 176 [police officers](#), mostly white males, average age 37, in large urban areas, to determine their levels of two distinct types of bias—prejudice and unconscious dehumanization of black people by comparing them to apes. To test for prejudice, researchers had officers complete a widely used psychological questionnaire with statements such as "It is likely that blacks will bring violence to neighborhoods when they move in." To determine officers' dehumanization of blacks, the researchers gave them a psychological task in which they paired blacks and whites with large cats, such as lions, or with apes. Researchers reviewed police officers' personnel records to determine use of force while on duty and found that those who dehumanized blacks were more likely to have used force against a black child in custody than officers

who did not dehumanize blacks. The study described use of force as takedown or wrist lock; kicking or punching; striking with a blunt object; using a police dog, restraints or hobbling; or using tear gas, electric shock or killing. Only dehumanization and not police officers' prejudice against blacks—conscious or not—was linked to violent encounters with black children in custody, according to the study.

The authors noted that police officers' unconscious dehumanization of blacks could have been the result of negative interactions with black children, rather than the cause of using force with black children. "We found evidence that overestimating age and culpability based on racial differences was linked to dehumanizing stereotypes, but future research should try to clarify the relationship between dehumanization and racial disparities in police use of force," Goff said.

The study also involved 264 mostly white, female undergraduate students from large public U.S. universities. In one experiment, students rated the innocence of people ranging from infants to 25-year-olds who were black, white or an unidentified race. The students judged children up to 9 years old as equally innocent regardless of race, but considered black children significantly less innocent than other children in every age group beginning at age 10, the researchers found.

The students were also shown photographs alongside descriptions of various crimes and asked to assess the age and innocence of white, black or Latino boys ages 10 to 17. The students overestimated the age of blacks by an average of 4.5 years and found them more culpable than whites or Latinos, particularly when the boys were matched with serious crimes, the study found. Researchers used questionnaires to assess the participants' prejudice and dehumanization of blacks. They found that participants who implicitly associated blacks with apes thought the black children were older and less innocent.

In another experiment, students first viewed either a photo of an ape or a large cat and then rated black and white youngsters in terms of perceived innocence and need for protection as children. Those who looked at the ape photo gave black children lower ratings and estimated that black children were significantly older than their actual ages, particularly if the child had been accused of a felony rather than a misdemeanor.

"The evidence shows that perceptions of the essential nature of children can be affected by race, and for black children, this can mean they lose the protection afforded by assumed childhood innocence well before they become adults," said co-author Matthew Jackson, PhD, also of UCLA. "With the average age overestimation for black boys exceeding four-and-a-half years, in some cases, [black children](#) may be viewed as adults when they are just 13 years old."

More information: "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online Feb. 24, 2014

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