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How Black Girls Aren't Presumed to Be Innocent

A new study finds that adults view them as less child-like and less in need of protection than their white peers.

ADRIENNE GREEN JUNE 29, 2017

LUCY NICHOLSON / REUTERS

A growing body of evidence has shown that the American education and criminal-justice systems dole out harsher and more frequent discipline to black youth compared with their non-black peers. But while most of that research has focused on black boys, a new study from the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality specifically turned its attention to society's perception of black girls.

Researchers built in part on a 2014 report that concluded black boys are wrongly perceived as older than their actual age and are more likely to be viewed as guilty when they are suspected of a crime. The Georgetown study sought to determine whether there's a similar effect for black girls—whether adults identify them as less innocent and less child-like than white girls of the same age. The results were resounding: Not only do the researchers report that "black girls were more likely to be viewed as behaving and seeming older than their stated age," they also find that this dynamic is in place for girls as young as 5 years old.

The study surveyed 325 adults from different racial, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, and from different regions of the country. (Most were white and female.) The researchers asked some participants about their perceptions of black girls, and some about white girls of the same age. Questions included: "How much do black [or white] females need to be comforted?" and "How much do black [or white] females seem older than their age?"

The authors describe a pattern in their findings: "Across all age ranges, participants viewed black girls collectively as more adult than white girls," the study reports. "Responses revealed, in particular, that participants perceived black girls as needing less protection and nurturing than white girls, and that black girls were perceived to know more about adult topics and are more knowledgeable about sex than their white peers."

When asked what she found most surprising about the results, Jamilia Blake, an associate professor at Texas A&M University and one of the report's authors, said: "The age that we start to see this was very shocking. The fact that you would think a 5-year-old is more knowledgeable about sex is amazing to me."

The researchers suggest there is a connection between the stripping of black girls' innocence and the harsher treatment they receive from public school officials and law enforcement. According to the study, compared to white girls, black girls are two times more likely to be disciplined for minor infractions like dress-code violations or loitering, two-and-a-half times more likely to be punished for disobedience, and three times more likely to be cited for being disruptive.

While those statistics were obtained by surveying just one school in Kentucky, the authors say they hint at a broader trend of black girls enduring more punitive treatment than their peers: "Simply put, if authorities in public systems view black girls as less innocent, less needing of protection, and generally more like adults, it appears likely that they would also view black girls as more culpable for their actions and, on that basis, punish them more harshly despite their status as children."

The inclination to unfairly condemn black girls' behavior has far-reaching consequences —it not only affects their day-to-day lives on an individual level, but also influences how black girls as a group are perceived into adulthood. These girls seem to be associated with damaging stereotypes ascribed specifically to black women, such as being loud, defiant, and over-sexualized.

Several recent incidents highlight the grave implications of subjectively defining what it means to be an innocent and compliant child. In 2013, a 16-year-old girl from Florida was arrested and expelled after her science experiment produced a minor explosion at school. A 15-year-old girl was slammed to the ground in 2015 by a McKinney, Texas, police officer who pinned her underneath his knees. Later that year, a 16-year-old girl was grabbed out of her seat by her neck and tossed across a South Carolina classroom by a school police officer. And in May, two 15-year-old twins in Boston faced detention and suspension because administrators said their braided hairstyles violated the school's dress code. These anecdotes suggest that authorities' perceptions of black girls may directly influence whether they come into contact with the juvenile-justice system, where as a group they are more likely to be referred and detained.

In an interview with *The Atlantic* last year, Monique W. Morris, the author of *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* and a consultant on the Georgetown study, said people have "implicit racial and gender biases" when it comes to black femininity. She described how those biases affect how people perceive black girls and women:

> Too often, when people read these statistics, they ask, "What did these girls do?" when often, it's not about what they did, but rather the culture of discipline and punishment that leaves little room for error when one is black and female.
>
> Black girls describe being labeled and suspended for being "disruptive" or "defiant" if they ask questions or otherwise engage in activities that adults consider affronts to their authority. Across the country, we see black girls being placed in handcuffs for having tantrums in kindergarten classrooms, thrown out of class for asking questions, sent home from school for arriving in shorts on a hot day. … We also see black girls criminalized—arrested on campus or referred to law enforcement—instead of engaged as children and teens whose mistakes could be addressed through non-punitive, restorative approaches.

Both Morris and the study's authors note that the United States' legacy of racial discrimination—one that dehumanizes and sexualizes young girls of color—factors into how the child-like behavior of black youth is interpreted. "Adultification contributes to a false narrative that black youths' transgressions are intentional and malicious, instead of the result of immature decision-making—a key characteristic of childhood," the authors write. While such conclusions might not seem especially fresh given this

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a false narrative that black youths' transgressions are intentional and malicious, instead of the result of immature decision-making—a key characteristic of childhood," the authors write. While such conclusions might not seem especially fresh given this history, the study's utility lies in its explicit focus on the assumption of innocence as integral to childhood. White children benefit from better educational, legal, and social protections precisely because of this phenomenon, while black children aren't as willingly afforded a pass for any youthful indiscretions.

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