

Aging in the Eyes of Others: Black Girls Aren't Given A Chance to Be Girls, with Painful Consequences

How does a 19 year old, 5 foot 2 inch, 120-pound girl get mistaken for a 6-foot tall 170-pound bald adult male? Since when do police require a 15 year old girl's mother and father to prove that their daughter is allowed to use a student Metrocard on the subway? The answer may lie in the findings of a new Georgetown Law study, which exposes that adults view Black girls as older, more adult-like, and less innocent.

On a daily basis Black girls experience the world differently than their peers. Data show that from the schoolyard to the classroom, to the streets and into the juvenile justice system, adults treat Black girls differently than their white peers. Black girls are vulnerable not only to stereotypes, biases, and perceptions based on their race, but as importantly, based on their gender.

Recognizing the significant impact that adult perceptions can have on children, researchers at the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality set out to examine for the first time whether adults view Black girls as possessing qualities that render them more like adults—and less innocent—than their white peers.

The study surveyed 325 adults from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and educational levels across the United States. Participants completed a nine-item questionnaire. Respondents were not informed of the survey's purpose, but instead were asked to complete only a questionnaire about their beliefs about children's development in the twenty-first

century. Each participant was randomly assigned either a questionnaire that asked about the respondent's perception of Black girls, or a questionnaire that asked the same questions about the respondent's perception of white girls. Even though the online questionnaire responses were self-reports, the respondents were unaware that their responses about black or white girls would be compared with the other race, thus lowering the risk of respondents hiding their own biases and skewing the data.

As outlined in the report, [*Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*](#), researchers found that adults view Black girls as more adult than their white peers at almost all stages of childhood, beginning at the age of 5, peaking during the ages of 10 to 14, and continuing during the ages of 15 to 19.

Girlhood Interrupted specifically reveals that adults perceive:

- Black girls to be older than white girls of the same age.
- Black girls to need less nurturing and protection than white girls.
- Black girls to need less support or comforting than white girls.
- Black girls to be more independent than white girls.
- Black girls know more about adult topics, including sex, than white girls.

Across the four age brackets examined, the most significant differences in adult perceptions were found with respect to girls in mid-childhood (ages 5-9) and early adolescence (10-14), with differences continuing to a lesser degree in the 15 to 19-year-old group. Thus, adults appear to place distinct views and expectations on Black girls that characterize them as developmentally older than their white peers, especially in mid-childhood and early

adolescence–critical periods for healthy identity development.

The significance of the findings lies in the possibility that adultification acts as a contributing cause for the documented harsher treatment that Black girls receive when compared to white girls of the same age.

Simply put, if authorities in public systems view Black girls as less innocent, less needing of protection, and generally more like adults, it seems likely that they might also view Black girls as more culpable for their actions and, on that basis, punish them more harshly despite their status as children.

Thus, adultification may serve as a contributing cause of the disproportionality in school discipline outcomes, harsher treatment by law enforcement, and the differentiated exercise of discretion by officials across the spectrum of the juvenile justice system.

Future research should explore whether the same or similar forms of bias are manifested with respect to other girls of color. New research will help shape the contours of various reforms to policy and practice, inform the development of trainings, and address the far-reaching negative consequences that stereotypes, biases, and perceptions can have on girls and young women. But as it stands, the findings summarized here indicate a need to improve our training of public officials – teachers, police officers, even bus drivers – to better recognize the biases they may hold so that Black girls are not singled out unfairly.

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