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Stanford psychologists examine how race affects juvenile sentencing

As the Supreme Court considers whether to further limit sentences given to juveniles, new research by Stanford psychologists shows how an offender's race shifts people's support for severe punishment.

By Brooke Donald

When it comes to holding children accountable for crimes they commit, race matters.

According to a new study by Stanford psychologists, if people imagine a juvenile offender to be black, they are more willing to hand down harsher sentences to all juveniles.

"These results highlight the fragility of protections for juveniles when race is in play," said [Aneeta Rattan](#), lead author of the [study](#), which appears this week in the journal *PloS ONE*.

Historically, the courts have protected juveniles from the most severe sentences. It has been recognized that children are different from adults – they don't use adult reasoning and don't have impulse control to the same degree.

The Supreme Court has barred the death penalty for juveniles and, in 2010, said life without parole for non-homicide crimes violated the Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

Currently the court is considering two cases regarding juveniles involved in murders who were sentenced to life without parole. The justices are weighing whether they will further limit harsh sentences for young people.

The Stanford research was inspired, in part, by the cases most recently before the high court, said [Jennifer Eberhardt](#), senior author of the study.

"The statistics out there indicate that there are racial disparities in sentencing juveniles who have committed severe crimes," said Eberhardt, associate professor of psychology. "That led us to wonder, to what extent does race play a role in how people think about juvenile status?"

The study involved a nationally representative sample of 735 white Americans. Only white participants were used because whites are statistically overrepresented on juries, in the legal field and in the judiciary.

The participants were asked to read about a 14-year-old male with 17 prior juvenile convictions who brutally raped an elderly woman. Half of the respondents were told the offender was black; the other half were told he was white. The difference in race was the only change between the two stories.

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'The findings showed that people without racial animus or bias are affected by race as much as those with bias,' said psychology Professor Carol Dweck, one of the study authors.

The researchers then asked the participants two questions dealing with sentencing and perception.

The first: To what extent do you support life sentences without the possibility of parole for juveniles when no one was killed?

The second: How much do you believe that juveniles who commit crimes such as these should be considered less blameworthy than an adult who commits a similar crime?

The study found that participants who had in mind a black offender more strongly endorsed a policy of sentencing juveniles convicted of violent crimes to life in prison without parole compared to respondents who had in mind a white offender.

"The fact that imagining a particular target could influence your perceptions of a policy that would affect an entire class of people, we think, is pretty important to know," Eberhardt said.

The black-offender group also rated juvenile offenders as more similar to adults in their culpability than did respondents in the white-offender group.

"Race is shifting how they are thinking about juveniles," Eberhardt said. "So the protected status the offenders have as juveniles is threatened."

The study took into account racial bias and political ideology, yet neither accounted for these effects.

"The findings showed that people without racial animus or bias are affected by race as much as those with bias," said [Carol Dweck](#), another of the study's authors.

"That suggests they believe black offenders will likely be the same when they're adults but white offenders are in a developmental period and could be very different adults. This starts breaking down the protections against the most severe sentences," said Dweck, the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor in the Department of Psychology.

The study's authors are hopeful the findings will spur a conversation about how race affects sentencing of juveniles.

"We think about the legal world as having rules and you apply the rules equally to everyone," said Rattan, who is a postdoctoral research scholar in the Department of Psychology. "What we're really showing is that there's a potential for that to not be the case."

"And that the rules themselves may be biased already," Dweck added.

The paper, "[Race and the Fragility of the Legal Distinction Between Juveniles and Adults](#)," by Aneeta Rattan, Cynthia S. Levine, Carol S. Dweck and Jennifer L. Eberhardt, was published in *PLoS ONE* on May 23.

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