

Younger And More Innocent Than Thought

The Cleveland police officer who shot and killed unarmed, 12-year-old Tamir Rice in 2014 said that he was in fear of his life. For some, a new study may explain the deeper reasons for Officer Tim Loehmann's fear.

Researchers at the University of Iowa found that people who were shown a black face first would more easily misidentify toy guns as weapons – even if the face was a child's. The study also showed that actual guns were assumed to be toys more often after the participants were shown a white face than after seeing a black one.

"It's disheartening, is what it is," said Kenneth Anderson, a licensed counselor and diversity expert based in Alabama. "I would argue that it has a lot to do with the perceptual bias that exists about black boys and teens." A 2014 study published by the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology addressed the perceptual bias issue that Anderson raised. Researchers found that black boys are more likely to be seen as older and guiltier than white boys – and, if accused of a crime, are more likely to face police violence. "Children in most societies are considered to be in a distinct group with characteristics such as innocence and the need for protection," said Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff, author of the study, in a press release. "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."

Is that what happened with Tamir Rice? Was his fate set by deeply buried biases about his capacity for criminality due to the color of his skin? Was it easier for Loehmann to see a toy gun as a lethal weapon because Rice was a black boy?

The Iowa study strongly suggests the answer to these questions are "yes." White college students were asked to describe objects and words as either threatening or nonthreatening after being shown images of people of different races and ages. Not only were they more likely to consider the objects as threatening if shown images of black boys – whether or not the objects actually were threatening – they also were more likely to associate words such as "hostile" and "violent" with the faces of black boys.

Supreme Court rulings have concluded that if such reactions from police officers result in fatal shootings, they can be considered "objectively reasonable," even if it means that unarmed black boys are shot and killed. Prosecutors such as Tim McGinty of Cuyahoga County, Ohio, seem to agree. McGinty convened the grand jury that declined to indict Loehmann for killing the unarmed Tamar Rice.

But diversity experts such as Anderson see such perceptions of black boys as lethal threats to their survival, perhaps nearly as dangerous as being shot by a police officer.

"Kids buy in to a self-fulfilling prophecy," said Anderson. "So if the belief in a child is that they will fail, then their behavior begins to follow the track of failure."

Anderson believes that supportive parents and mentoring organizations can help prevent a child from taking this path – or help rescue one who already has. As for the adults who would stereotype black boys as criminals, Anderson says they need to challenge their own belief systems.

And maybe what that requires is a bit of grace, which best-selling author

Philip Yancey fears has disappeared from our society – especially when it comes to discussing the topic of race. Yancey, who wrote the Christian classic *What's So Amazing About Grace* and 2014's *Vanishing Grace*, grew up in Atlanta during the civil rights era.

"My church was on the wrong side of the race issue," Yancey said during a 2014 radio interview. "I was a racist. I believed those lies."

Yancey credits the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with helping him to change. His revised commitment is embodied in [Heb. 12:15 \(NET\)](#): "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God."

"Jesus set forth a kind of force in the world, a counter-force where we don't get what we deserve," Yancey explained. "We get the opposite of what we deserve. We deserve God's anger, instead we get God's love. We deserve God's punishment, instead we get God's forgiveness."

This grace applies to people of all races, and of all mindsets about race. It offers the ultimate answer to the benign evil of bigoted fears, fatal stereotyping, and every other human weakness.

"There's nothing we can do to make God love us more," Yancey said. "And there's nothing we can do to make God love us less."