

# Black Men Stereotyped as Threatening

A new study (March 2017) led by John Paul Wilson, an assistant professor of social psychology at Montclair State University in New Jersey, found that people tend to perceive Black men as larger and more threatening than White men of the same size. In a series of experiments, participants were shown photographs of Black and White male faces that had identical height and weight. The participants were asked to estimate each individual's height and weight as well as strength and muscularity.

Specifically, the report outlines how Black men tend to be stereotyped as threatening and, as a result, may be disproportionately targeted by police even when unarmed. Hence the study found evidence that biased perceptions of young Black men's physical size may play a role in this process. The results of 7 studies showed that people have a bias to perceive young Black men as bigger (taller, heavier, more muscular) and more physically threatening (stronger, more capable of harm) than young White men. Both bottom-up cues of racial prototypicality and top-down information about race supported these misperceptions. Furthermore, this racial bias persisted even among a target sample from whom upper-body strength was controlled (suggesting that racial differences in formidability judgments are a product of bias rather than accuracy). Biased formidability judgments in turn promoted participants' justifications of hypothetical use of force against Black suspects of crime. Thus, perceivers appear to integrate multiple pieces of information to ultimately conclude that young Black men are more physically threatening than young White men, believing that they must therefore be controlled using more aggressive measures.

John Paul Wilson's research interestingly found that even Black perceivers overestimated the physical size of Black targets relative to White, but the link between perceived size and harm capability was limited to White perceivers. These biased judgments of physical formidability ultimately predicted the extent to which people justify the hypothetical use of force. Critically, biased formidability perceptions were related both to bottom-up qualities of the face as well as top-down racial information. Overall, Wilson's research investigates social perception and cognition with a strong focus on social context; hence, he is particularly interested in intergroup influences on social perception and the consequences of such perceptions on downstream behavior and outcomes for both perceiver and target.

The article, "Racial Bias in Judgments of Physical Size and Formidability: From Size to Threat," by John Paul Wilson, Kurt Hugenberg, and Nicholas O. Rule was published (March 13, 2017) by the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, a publication of the American Psychological Association. March 13, 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000092>; <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-pspi0000092.pdf>