

The Harms of Structural Whiteness on Weapon Carrying, Policing, and Child Health

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We live in a country that “adultifies” and criminalizes children simply for not being white. “Adultification” is the process by which certain children are perceived as older than their actual age and, as a result, are regarded as less innocent and subject to callous and sometimes violent treatment. This misperception of Black children begins as young as age 5 for Black girls and age 10 for Black boys and is far from benign.^{1,2}

Misperceptions of children that deny them the presumption of innocence affect the ways we, as a society, protect children, legally and socially.^{1,2} Consequently, when children of color are routinely misperceived as older, the protections typically afforded all children as a function of their age and developmental stage can come to uniquely benefit white children as a material advantage of their whiteness. This process has two related effects: it absolves white children from scrutiny, and it contributes to the inordinate policing of children of color.

In this issue of *Pediatrics*, Jewett et al³ examine patterns of weapon carrying in US schools among white, Black, and Hispanic boys. Using data from the Youth Behavior Surveillance System from 1993 to 2019, Jewett et al³ compared self-reported weapon carrying in US high schools by race and/or ethnicity, age, and school

climate. Their results expose troubling patterns of weapon carrying in white boys that impugn the common justifications used to disproportionately punish and police Black and Hispanic children.

The authors found that weapon carrying in US high schools has significantly decreased since 1993. In fact, in 2017 and 2019, only 4.6% of all boys reported bringing a weapon to school. That means most boys reported that they “never missed school in the past 30 days because they felt unsafe” (93.3%), “were never threatened or injured at school in the past 12 months” (92.3%), and “were never in a physical fight at school in the past 12 months” (88.6%).³

Notably, in the majority of schools in which most boys reported never feeling threatened or being injured, white boys were more likely to bring weapons to school than boys of color. In addition, weapon carrying among white boys, unlike Black and Hispanic boys, did not appear to be in response to concerns for safety. On the contrary, white boys were more likely to report bringing weapons to the schools in which they also reported never being threatened, injured, or in a physical fight.³

These findings are telling. Despite the clear downward trend in weapon

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carrying over the past few decades, the number of police officers in schools has risen considerably. Between 1996 and 2013, the number of police officers in schools more than doubled.⁴ Now 42% of public schools have at least one law enforcement officer on campus at least 1 day per week.^{4,5} This rise in school policing began in the late 1990s amid a national political discourse that elevated a racist caricature demeaning low-income youth of color as “superpredators.” These racist misperceptions contributed to enormous investments in police in schools.^{4,6}

Then in 1999, the Columbine High School massacre happened. Instead of confronting our nation’s legacy of white supremacy (that has afforded white populations disproportionate access to firearms), strengthening gun control legislation, or addressing the need for proactive mental health services for children and adolescents, the legislative response included placing even more police officers in schools.^{4,6,7} Investing in police in schools comes at the cost of adequate investments in school-based mental health supports that bolster the social and emotional well-being of children and adolescents and improve school climate. Nationwide, 14 million students currently attend a school that has a police officer but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.⁸ Relatedly, fewer than half of US public high schools provide any mental health treatment services, an outcome driven by inadequate funding.⁹

Furthermore, police presence within US schools has never been evenly distributed. Although Jewett et al³ found no significant differences in weapon carrying by race and/or ethnicity across all schools in 2017 and 2019, according to a 2017 American Civil Liberties Union report, students of color are more

likely to attend schools with police. They are also more likely to be referred to law enforcement and arrested at school.^{6,8} And even when violence in school neighborhoods is held constant, the American Civil Liberties Union found that students who attend schools that are predominantly Black or lower income are also “more likely [to face additional] security measures like metal detectors, random ‘contraband’ sweeps, security guards, and security cameras.”⁸

Taken together, the findings by Jewett et al³ challenge the racialized and racist perceptions of weapon carrying that have informed the ways we, as a society, punish and police children of color. They also draw rare attention to the ways we misname and thus ineffectively address the drivers of weapon carrying among white boys. This study then prompts two critical questions: First, because concerns about and experiences with violence increase weapon-carrying behaviors among boys, what can be done to make schools safer, particularly for boys of color, who are more likely to report these concerns? Second, how do we address the factors that drive weapon-carrying behaviors in white boys who attend schools perceived as safe?

A simple answer to both questions is gun control.

Yet children of color can also be subject to punishment and policing even without brandishing a weapon, let alone a gun. Sixteen-year-old Kalief Browder was jailed without trial and subjected to 3 years on Rikers Island (2 of which were spent in the torturous isolation of solitary confinement) all for allegedly stealing a backpack.¹⁰ A 15-year-old Black girl in Michigan was sent to juvenile detention for simply not doing her homework.¹¹ A 17-year-old Hispanic boy in Texas

was tased at school for attempting to break up a fight.¹²

Thus, a more nuanced response requires naming and addressing the ways structural whiteness harms child health by excluding children of color from presumptions of innocence, subjecting children of color to the cruel treatment often reserved only for adults, investing in policing at the expense of children’s social and emotional needs, and rendering the role of structural whiteness in shaping access to firearms nearly invisible in public discourse and academic study.

Listening to the parents, children, and adolescents of color who have consistently named the harms of police in schools is also vital to identifying factors that increase school safety.^{6,13} Future research should explore the relationship between structural whiteness, the punitive treatment of children of color, and children’s physical and mental well-being. Additional study should also explore the implications of these findings for girls and sexual and gender minorities across racial and ethnic groups.

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