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

Rhea W. Boyd, MD, MPH

DOI: 10.1542/peds.2021-050314

Journal: Pediatrics

Article Type: Solicited Commentary

Citation: Boyd RW. The harms of structural whiteness on weapon-carrying, policing, and child health. Pediatrics. 2021; doi: 10.1542/peds.2021-050314

This is a prepublication version of an article that has undergone peer review and been accepted for publication but is not the final version of record. This paper may be cited using the DOI and date of access. This paper may contain information that has errors in facts, figures, and statements, and will be corrected in the final published version. The journal is providing an early version of this article to expedite access to this information. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the editors, and authors are not responsible for inaccurate information and data described in this version.
The Harms of Structural Whiteness on Weapon-Carrying, Policing, and Child Health

Rhea W. Boyd, MD, MPH

Affiliation: Palo Alto Medical Foundation, Palo Alto, California

Correspondence:
Rhea W Boyd
Sutter Health
2200 River Plaza Dr
Sacramento CA 95833
rhea@cachildrenstrust.org

Short Title: Structural Whiteness, Weapon-Carrying, and Child Health

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding/Support: None

Abbreviations: ACLU, American Civil Liberties Union
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, 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 contributes to the inordinate policing of children of color.

In this issue of *Pediatrics*, Jewett et al examine patterns of weapon-carrying in US schools among white, Black and Hispanic boys. Using data from the Youth Behavior Surveillance System from 1993–2019, Jewell et al compared self-reported weapon-carrying in US high schools by race/ethnicity, age, and school climate.³ 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 2017/2019, only 4.6% of all boys reported bringing a weapon to school. That means most boys reported “never missing school because of feeling unsafe in the past 30 days”
(93.3%), “never being threatened or injured in school in the past 12 months” (92.3%), and “never engaging in a physical fight in the past 12 months” (88.6%).

Notably, in the majority of schools, in which most boys report 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.

These findings are telling. Despite the clear downward trend in weapon-carrying over the past few decades, the number of police in schools has risen considerably. Between 1996 and 2013, the number of police in schools more than doubled. Now 42% of public schools have at least one law enforcement officer on campus, at least one day per week. 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.

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 in schools. 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 police 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 Jewell et al found no significant differences in weapon-carrying by race/ethnicity across all schools in 2017/2019, according to a 2017 ACLU 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 ACLU 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, Jewell et al’s findings 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, since 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, subjected to three years on Rikers Island—two of which were spent in the torturous isolation of solitary confinement—all for allegedly stealing a backpack. A 15-year-old Black girl in Michigan was sent to juvenile detention for simply not doing her homework. A 17-year-old Hispanic boy in Texas was tased at school for attempting to break up a fight.

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. 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.
References


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

Rhea W. Boyd

*Pediatrics* originally published online April 22, 2021;

**Updated Information & Services** including high resolution figures, can be found at:
http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2021/04/20/peds.2021-050314.citation

**Permissions & Licensing** Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at:
http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/Permissions.xhtml

**Reprints** Information about ordering reprints can be found online:
http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/reprints.xhtml
The Harms of Structural Whiteness on Weapon-Carrying, Policing, and Child Health
Rhea W. Boyd
Pediatrics originally published online April 22, 2021;

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2021/04/20/peds.2021-050314.citation