

How Psychology Explains the Tamir Rice Shooting

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The Atlantic's CityLab:

On a Sunday in November 2014, a Cleveland man dialed 911 to report that a young black boy—“probably a juvenile”—was brandishing a gun around in the park near him. “It’s probably fake, but it’s scaring the shit out of me,” the caller said on the phone. The officer who responded fatally shot the subject of the 911 call within seconds of arriving. The boy, it turned out, was 11-year-old; and his gun was just a toy.

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In other words, Loehmann (just like the man who called 911) perceived an 11-year old black boy with a toy gun as an existential threat. Why? Well, in part, it’s because implicit biases that cause people to associate adult black men with stereotypes of violence also extend to black boys—even those as young as 5 years old, new research published in *Psychological Science* finds.

“Our findings suggest that, although young children are typically viewed as harmless and innocent, seeing faces of five-year-old Black boys appears to trigger thoughts of guns and violence,” said Andrew Todd, the lead author of the study and an assistant professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Iowa, in a press release.

For their study, Todd and colleagues Kelsey Thiem and Rebecca Neel conducted a series of experiences similar to the implicit bias detection test. In the first one, 64 white college students were shown two images in quick succession. The first, which the participants were told to ignore, showed the face of a black or white child; the second showed either a gun or a toy (like a rattle). The participants were then asked to identify the object in the second image.

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