

**Perceived Guilt of African American Males by Skin Tone:  
A Survey of Black High School Students**

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Math Senior Seminar  
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May 2021

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how younger African Americans see race and skin tone in the criminal justice system. In other studies, researchers focused on the stereotypes white adults have of African Americans. We hypothesized that black suspects, regardless of skin tone, are perceived as more likely to be guilty and have harsher punishments. We also hypothesized that darker skinned suspects are more likely to be guilty and punished longer or harsher. Participants received a survey that includes four different teenagers, one white and one of three black suspects of different different skin tones. They were asked how guilty the male teenager was, and how long their punishment should be. We found that black high school students perceived the white male teenager more guilty than any of the three black male teenagers. Our study suggests that young teenagers are aware of the discrimination within the criminal justice system and judged their responses on how they feel.

## **Introduction**

In America, African American males are often seen as criminals due to negative stereotypes, which can hurt them in society (1). African Americans with darker skin are usually discriminated against more than lighter skinned people, due to stereotypes that diminish blackness (2). Even when adjusting for differences in education and income, darker skinned African Americans are still 1.2 times more likely to be arrested compared to lighter skinned black Americans (1). The purpose of this study is to provide additional evidence that black men are more likely to be seen as violent or as criminals, especially if they have darker skin. The sample of this study is primarily young and black, which makes it unique. This is important because it may show the stereotypes held by some older white Americans may also happen in the black community. If so, that would mean color discrimination is present in both communities.

Colorism is the discrimination between skin tones within a racial community. In this case, the discrimination of African Americans by skin tone. Colorism tends to have an effect when dealing with relationships, jobs, discrimination, and education (2). The darker a person's skin tone, the less opportunities that person may have. Colorism has a significant effect when it comes to discrimination when dealing with the criminal justice system. Other researchers have studied the racial perceptions of the criminal justice system. Although most of them had different methods, the results were all similar to each other. Blacks Americans are more likely to be seen and treated as criminals (3, 4, 5), especially those with darker skin (6, 1).

### *Perceptions of Black Criminality*

Hurwitz and Peffley studied white's biases and stereotypes against African Americans in the context of crime (5). In a 1994 telephone survey, they found that the majority of whites see African Americans as criminals and believe that they will repeat the same crime in the future. They also found that skin color may determine punishment. If a suspect is black, people were less likely to support furloughs or other rehabilitative programs. Whites in the survey thought blacks were more likely to be guilty of violence, and whites more guilty of embezzlement. This study shows that many whites agree on the stereotypes that Black Americans are violent and are more likely to be criminals, although the study did not look at skin tone.

The criminal justice system is affected by race, according to Cao, et al. (3). In this experiment, they asked 239 residents of Ohio, that were black and white, of various incomes and

backgrounds and found that whites are divided. They compared both races by giving several scenarios and comparing the outcomes on both ends. For example, both races were asked how likely it is for them to get stopped in a white neighborhood. When both racial groups were asked this question, 95.7% of blacks believed that they would be stopped in a white neighborhood, but 47.1% of whites thought blacks and whites would be treated equally. When it comes to racism, this study suggests nearly half of whites are blind to the reality and believe that there is no injustice, while the other half noticed the discrimination against whites and blacks. In another study, Davison, et al. studied patterns and perceptions on criminal suspects based on their names (4). The authors found that when being watched, people do not act racist, but when they were unaware of the racial aspect of the question, they act biased, this is known as aversive racism. In my study, I would like to see who will be more likely to be accused of doing a crime between three skin tone groups.

#### *Skin Tone and Perceptions of Criminality*

Research has also found that when officers think about crimes, they automatically think about black males, especially those with stereotypical features like dark skin (1). In this study, the authors used 150 white college students and 61 police officers to determine how fast they can associate a crime with a white or black male's face. This study is important because it shows the biases in the criminal justice system, because the system already has the idea that black males are more likely to be violent.

In the last study, Kizer studied if people with darker skin are more likely to have a disadvantage than lighter skinned people, even within families (6). She did so by comparing brothers' skin colors, family environment, their behaviors and ages. Kizer found out that people with darker skin are still more likely to be pointed as trouble, even within families. This is similar to my project because I will be comparing males with different skin tones, while Kizer determined who was more likely to commit the crime. It is important because siblings' skin tones and how likely they are to be arrested can show that the criminal justice system shapes society.

### *Study Hypotheses*

Overall, research suggests that darker skinned black males are more likely to be seen as a criminal or guilty of a crime. Most studies have focused on stereotypes white adults have of African Americans. In this study, we looked at how younger African Americans see race and skin tone. We used surveys with pictures of black males (light, medium, dark) and a police report of a suspected crime. Each participant saw a white suspect, and one of the black suspects. They were asked about a suspect's possible punishment and guilt. The goal was for the participants to react on racial stereotypes, but not be aware that we are measuring colorism as well.

We hypothesized that black suspects, regardless of skin tone, are perceived as more likely to be guilty and have harsher punishments. This is because research shows black Americans are stereotyped as criminals (3-5). We also hypothesized that darker skinned suspects are more likely to be guilty and punished longer or harsher. This is because research says darker skinned people are more likely to be arrested (6) and police officers are more likely to see darker skinned males as criminals (1). We hypothesized the skin tone of participants should matter. We suspected lighter skinned participants will judge black suspects more harshly compared to the white suspect, but darker skinned participants will not. This is because colorism predicts lighter-skinned people will have similar advantages as whites, and then may hold similar stereotypes about darker skinned people (2).

### **Methods**

My participants were students from 9th through the 12th grade from the Neighborhood Academy. The students totaled 56 people that are 100% black or biracial. Out of the 56 people, 68% are female and 32% are males. When referring to skin tone, 52% are brown skin, 14% dark skin, and 34% are light skin. The survey the participants took was created in Google Forms.

We gave our participants one of three different surveys. To avoid giving away the topic about colorism, each survey had one of three different skin tones instead of one combined survey. To trigger a racial reaction, a white suspect was included in each survey to see which color reaction would be bigger. We obtained four different pictures of teenage males. Each of those pictures included each male with the same facial expression, similar size, light, and age. We also had to adjust the color and contrast to differentiate skin tones. An armed robbery crime scenario was given that would be reasonable for a teenager to commit, we then asked how guilty the male teenager was, and how long their punishment would be.

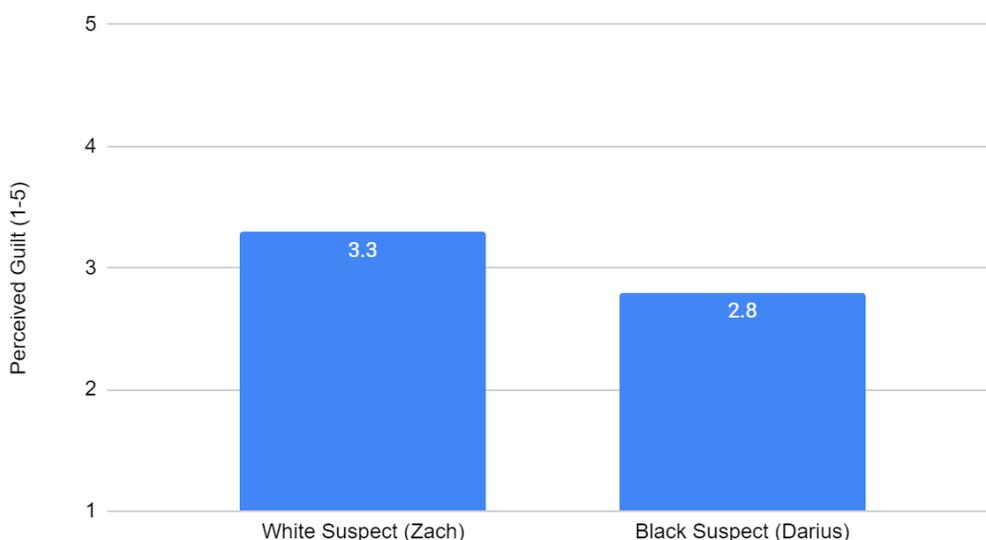
I used Google Forms to ask questions to students that attend my high school. My senior seminar teacher helped me with the survey, making sure that it looked acceptable. In order for the students to take my survey, I had to give it through Zoom classes and emails due to COVID restrictions.

## **Results**

In this study, we used teenage students to test their perceptions on stereotypes about black males. In most studies, researchers came up with the conclusion that black males are more likely to be seen as criminals, and in order to find this they focused on white and black adults. To further test this hypothesis, we gave teenage students a survey that consisted of a black and white teenage male. Students were to rate how likely both teenage boys committed the crime that was given in the scenario. We expected for the students to rate the darker skinned male (named Darius), to be more likely to commit the crime and to be punished longer than the white suspect (named Zach) .

First, we hypothesized that black suspects would be perceived as more likely to be guilty and receive harsher punishments. We compared the guilty rating (1-5) for the fictional white suspect, Zach, to the black suspect, Darius, who was depicted with three different skin tones. A t-test with correlated samples found a significant difference between levels of guilt ( $t(55) = 2.09$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). The white suspect ( $M = 3.3$ ) was looked at as more guilty compared to the black suspect ( $M = 2.8$ ). When looking at punishments, white and black suspects were treated basically the same, with only small differences (2%) between punishments.

### Perceived Guilt by Suspect Race



**Figure 1. Perceived Guilt by Suspect's Race.** *The graph shows the perceived guilt of two suspects from the questionnaire: a white suspect named Zach and a black suspect named Darius. Darius was shown using three different photos: light, medium and dark skin tone. There was a significant difference in perceived guilt. Zach was seen as more likely to be guilty than Darius.*

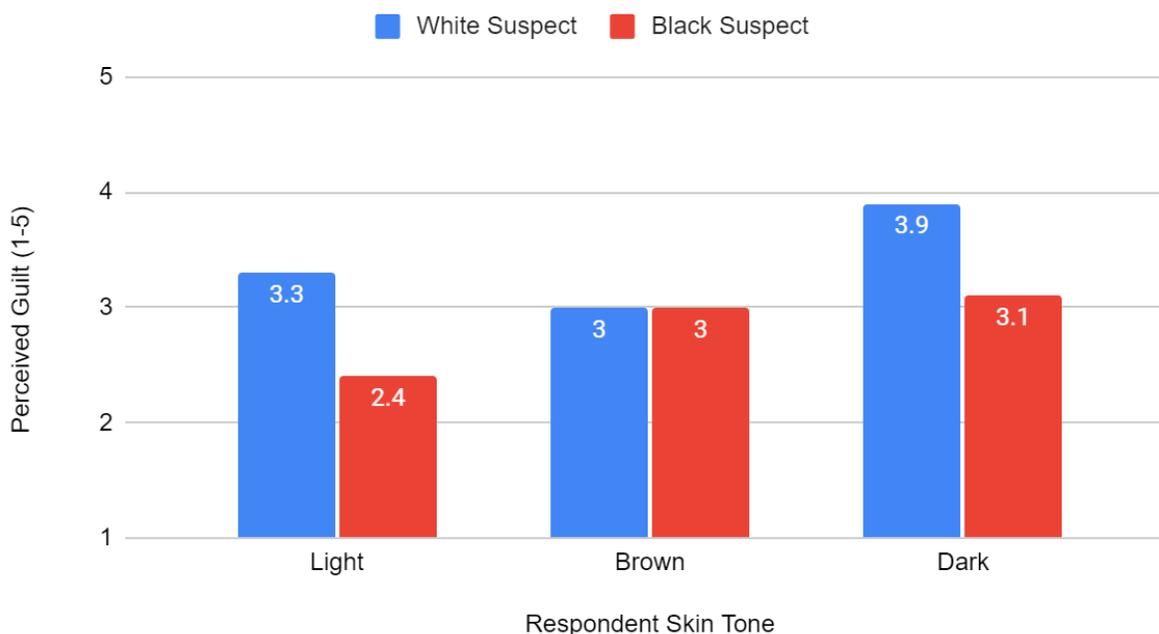
	Community Service	Juvenile Detention	Adult Prison (6m - 2y)	Adult Prison (2+ years)
White Suspect n=56	16%	38%	36%	11%
Black Suspect n=56	18%	38%	32%	13%
Light Skin Suspect n=23	17%	26%	52%	4%
Brown Skin Suspect n=18	17%	50%	22%	11%
Dark Skin Suspect n=15	7%	44%	13%	27%

**Table 1. Punishment by Suspect's Race and Skin Tone.** *This table shows that there was not a huge difference between punishments within the two races. Between the three races participants perceived the dark skin suspect to be more likely to be punished with a 2+ year sentence in adult prison.*

The second hypothesis was that the darker skinned suspect would be more likely to be guilty and punished longer. To answer this, we compared the guilt scores across the three different black suspects: light, brown, and dark skin tones. A one way ANOVA with independent samples was conducted; in this case we did not find a significant difference in skin tone ( $F(2,53)=0.62, p=0.54$ ). The dark skinned suspect was seen as less guilty ( $M=2.6, SD=0.6$ ), but it was not significantly different than the brown ( $M=2.9, SD=1.0$ ) or light skin ( $M=2.9, SD=1.0$ ) suspects. Looking at punishments, darker skinned suspects were more likely to be punished longer with 27%, light 4% and brown 11% given a sentence of adult prison 2+ years. The dark skinned suspect was the least to get community service with 7%.

Third, we hypothesized that participants who were lighter skinned will judge black suspects more harshly compared to the white suspect, but darker skinned participants will not. We compared the guilt scores to Zach (who is white) and Darius (who is black) across the different skin tones of TNA students. A t-test for correlated samples for light TNA students found the difference in the guilt of the two suspects ( $t(18) = 3.15, p = .006$ ). Darius ( $M=2.4$ ) was less guilty than Zach ( $M=3.3$ ). For brown skin TNA students, we did not find a significant difference in the guilt of the two suspects ( $t(56) = 0, p = 1$ ). Both Darius and Zach had the same perceived guilt ( $M=3.0$ ). Dark skin toned TNA students had no difference in the perceived guilt between the two suspects ( $t(7) = 0.94, p = 0.37$ ). While Darius had a higher score ( $M=3.9$ ) than Zach ( $M=3.1$ ) we can not come up with a conclusion because there were few dark skinned students.

## Perceived Guilt by Suspect Race and Respondent Skin Tone



**Figure 3. Perceived Guilt by Suspect and Respondent Skin Tone.** *The graph shows the perceived guilt on the black suspect(darius) based on skin tone. Darius was shown by using three different skin tones. Based on these results, there was a significant difference between light skin and dark skin Darius, but no difference with the brown skin Darius.*

### Discussion

We first hypothesized that black suspects would be seen as more guilty than the white suspect and that they will receive harsher punishments. We found the opposite because Zach was perceived as more guilty and both suspects were punished the same, therefore our hypothesis was unsupported. Our second hypothesis was that dark skinned people would be more likely to be guilty and punished. We found no clear differences in guilt, but for punishment, darker suspects were more likely to be punished harsher. This hypothesis was unsupported because there was not a huge difference. Third, we hypothesize lighter skin TNA students will judge the black suspect more harshly. However, light skinned students actually judged the white suspect more harshly. There was no effect for brown skin TNA students judgements, and dark skinned TNA students saw the white suspect as more guilty, but there were not enough dark toned students to find a difference. This hypothesis was not supported.

Light skinned TNA students said the white suspect was more guilty than the black suspect. Students were aware that our study was based on race and colorism. Because of this,

they may have overcompensated by judging the whites harsher. Light skinned black Americans are often accused of being “white” or “not black enough”, so they might be motivated to virtue signal they were not colorist by judging Zach poorly. Brown skin students saw the two suspects the same, because maybe they were triggered by race only and made sure both skin tones were seen the same. In previous research, white people showed no bias when it was obvious the comparison was about race, but were biased when not (4). The brown skinned participants in our study may have been like the white people in other research, they treated the suspects the same because they knew the point of the study. But light skinned students did not do that, they were triggered by both color and race, so they may have had a different thought process. Therefore, it is possible TNA students did not appear colorist because they were afraid to be called colorist. Instead, they may have made judgements based on how they looked, in addition to how the suspect looked.

We found that Darius (the black suspect) was judged less guilty than Zach (the white suspect). The most popular punishment was juvie; 56% wanted juvie or community service, so it is clear TNA students wanted to give out less harsh punishments. The sample included 100% black teens, so looking at the scores, they might have been giving their point of view of the criminal justice system as unfair to people like them. This showed that black teens are aware of racial injustice at TNA. Students from this sample, and their classmates and friends, are active participants in BLM protests in their city, and were likely empowered to express how they feel (7). This could have influenced our results.

Some factors that made differences with our study would be that there were fewer dark skin students to test the third hypothesis. Also, because of COVID-19, we were limited to online surveys and had to constantly implore kids to take it, so the sample is smaller than we wanted. Likewise, 68% of the sample were females, but we were asking about black males and gender could play a part in the results. Finally, TNA students may not have been honest about their self-reported skin tone. Anecdotally, black teens tend to see themselves as lighter than they are, due to stereotypes about skin tone.

In the future, researchers could make a more engaging scenario by using staged video or pictures. This might be helpful so they have a better feel for it, and could provide more emotional reactions that would be interesting. Researchers could also specifically use males, to

see if colorism is stronger for males or not. Lastly, they could do comparisons between male and female survey respondents to see if they see it differently for Zach vs. Darius.

Our findings suggest that young black teens are likely aware of discrimination against black people and colorism within the black community. While discrimination against black males and colorism are negative traits, it is good that young black teens are aware of how the criminal justice system may be unfair. We think TNA students based their opinions and answers on how they feel about racial injustice. By rating Zach (the white suspect) more guilty than Darius (the black suspect), we think they are not acting anti-white, but it is their own way of defending Darius, because they could see someone like him in their own lives and relate to Darius's fictional predicament.

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