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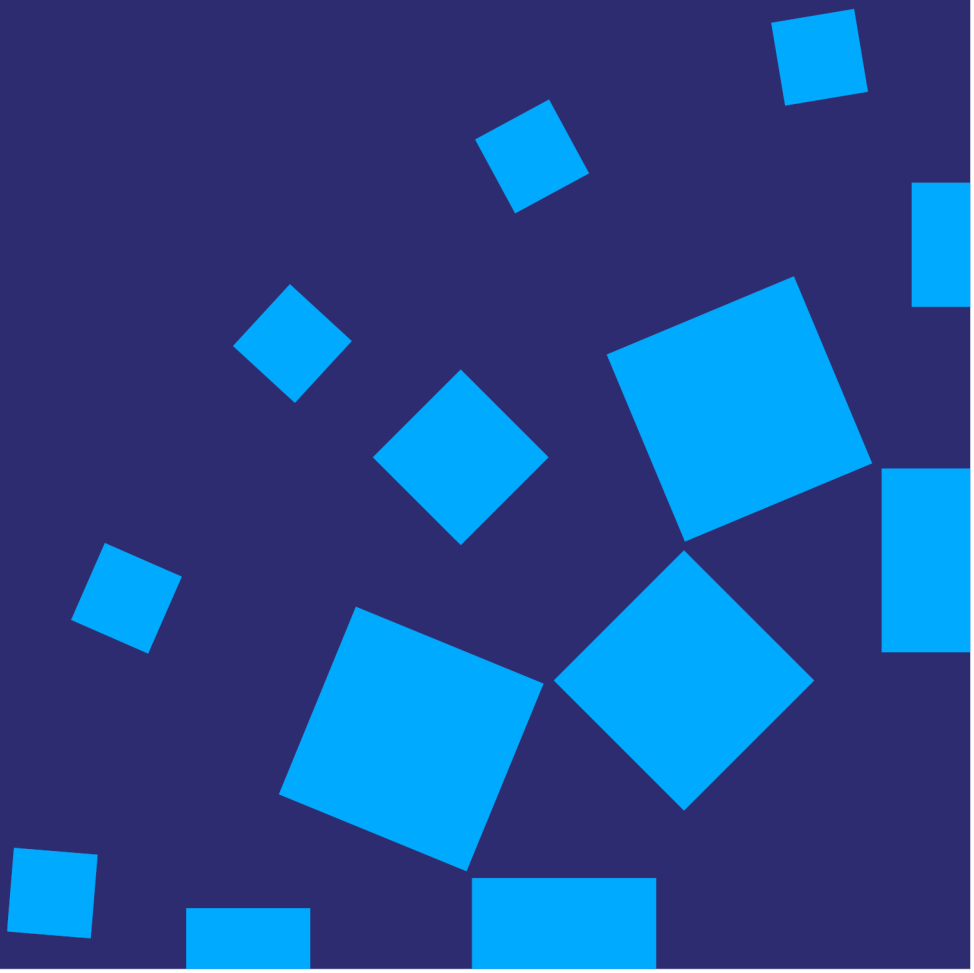
Adultification and adultification bias

Rapid evidence assessment

January 2026

Alexa Reed, Erin Dale, Pele Petnga-Wallace and Sarah Hutton



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Executive summary

Introduction

This rapid evidence assessment (REA) summarises existing evidence on the nature and extent of adultification, and what works to prevent and address this issue. The REA includes 24 studies on adultification and adultification bias. These studies were carried out across several contexts, such as policing, social care and the wider criminal justice system, although there were only a few studies in each area. The majority of the evidence came from the USA. Overall, the evidence base was limited in terms of research design, quality and generalisability. These limitations mean that, while emerging issues could be identified from the evidence, strong conclusions could not be drawn out.

Key findings

Adultification, as defined in the studies included in this review, relates to:

- children being perceived or treated as adults or older than their actual age
- children adopting adult roles and responsibilities

The evidence showed that adultification can affect any child. From the studies included in this review, it was not possible to conclude whether children from any particular background were at greater risk of experiencing adultification.

Studies included in this review reported the following:

- There is evidence of children's age being overestimated and/or children adopting adult roles and responsibilities or being treated as adults.
- Adultification may occur due to racial bias leading to discrimination and due to socioeconomic disadvantage.
- When children's ages were overestimated due to bias and/or they took on adult roles due to their socioeconomic circumstances, they often lacked appropriate support and safeguarding from adults around them. Additionally, when black children's ages were overestimated due to bias, research suggests they tended to receive harsher responses or punishment. They were also generally perceived more negatively by others, including community members and police officers.
- Adultification can have long-lasting, negative effects on children's wellbeing.

Implications for policing policy and practice

The insights from the REA can be used to review and understand how adultification may present in policing and other policy areas. This REA can also inform what actions may be required to prevent or address adultification, or to mitigate its impact. In line with the **Children and Young Person's Policing Strategy** (2024), the evidence summary raises the following implications for practice. Policing and other sectors should work together to ensure they:

- perceive and treat people under the age of 18 as children
- provide children with a child-protection response that reduces harm
- comprehensively identify children's needs and vulnerabilities, so that opportunities for early intervention to prevent negative consequences are capitalised on and escalation is prevented
- consider and prevent potential bias towards assumed levels of maturity and age, particularly when policing black children and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
- recognise when children's circumstances have resulted in them inappropriately undertaking adult roles and responsibilities and appropriately safeguard them

Future research

Interventions that aim to prevent or address adultification have rarely been implemented, and even fewer have been evaluated. There is a strong argument for policing to understand where adultification may be happening in their force, and to introduce and test innovative practice to address this. There is a related need to expand the evidence base to inform the development and implementation of more effective anti-adultification strategies. Research is needed, particularly in the context of policing in England and Wales, to:

- understand 'what works' to prevent and address adultification, for whom, under which circumstances, and why
- track the progress and longer-term impact of interventions over time
- use qualitative approaches, in combination with quantitative analysis, to provide more in-depth insight on children's perceptions and experiences of adultification, the success of interventions and areas for improvement

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Introduction

Background

The **Police Race Action Plan** (PRAP) is a national programme led jointly by the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). It has been developed in consultation with stakeholders, including the National Black Police Association (NBPA) and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC). The PRAP aims to create a police service that is anti-racist and trusted by black people.

One of the aims of the PRAP is to ensure that police forces consistently use age-appropriate policing. The PRAP workstream on protecting black communities from victimisation has conducted work to support this area.

'Adultification' is a term used to describe discrimination and bias, where some children are presumed to be older and less vulnerable compared to other children. Some literature refers to 'adultification bias', which is a term used to describe instances of children being required to take on adult roles for various reasons. While adultification is not a new phenomenon, the term is relatively new. This report refers to 'adultification' to encompass all other terms used to describe this concept.

Adultification is a term often used to describe how biases lead to perceptions of children – in particular, black children – being more adult-like, resulting in discriminatory treatment (Goff and others, 2014). In 2022, a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review was published in response to the strip search of Child Q. This was one of the first reviews in the UK to openly reference adultification as a factor influencing the safeguarding of a black child. The Children's Commissioner (2023) subsequently conducted analysis of strip search data across England and Wales, concluding that what happened to Child Q was not an isolated incident. The analysis indicated widespread, systemic problems around child protection and ethnic disproportionality that particularly affected black boys.

The Children's Commissioner (2024) found evidence of positive change in their latest report. The number of strip searches appeared to be declining and racial disparity in the strip searching of children had also reduced. However, black children were still four times more likely to be strip searched than white children. Additionally,

research found that children and young people felt traumatised, humiliated and damaged after being strip searched. This was true even if officers conducted the strip search as politely and sensitively as possible, but the negative impacts were greater if it was conducted disrespectfully (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children in Police Custody, 2025). The report subsequently recommended additional measures to improve support for children and stated that strip search should be done as a last resort only.

There are protections in place for children, in the form or legislation including the:

- **public sector equality duty** (Home Office, 2011), which requires public authorities to consider the impact of their practice on people with protected characteristics, one of which is age
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), which defines a child as a human being below the age of 18, unless the relevant laws recognise an earlier age of maturity

Protections for children are also covered in some specific policing legislation, such as the **Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984** (PACE) (Home Office, 2013).

To help address issues related to policing children, the NPCC developed a **Children and Young Person's Policing Strategy** (2024). This strategy sets out a framework, based heavily on procedural justice, for police forces to use when developing a child-centred approach to policing,

In light of the PRAP's aims, the Child Q case and wider systemic problems, the PRAP commissioned a rapid evidence assessment (REA) to review the evidence base on adultification. As adultification is an emerging area of policy debate, the REA was designed to be inclusive. It looked for evidence on both the nature and the extent of adultification, with the aim of identifying evidence on what works to prevent and address this issue. The findings should support senior police leaders and policymakers to understand how adultification may present in policing, and what action might be required to address this.

Methods

Rapid evidence assessments

REAs use a transparent, structured and systematic process to screen and synthesise evidence on a particular topic. An REA is not an exhaustive summary of existing literature like a full systematic review. Instead, it places limits on the review process to enable the review to be delivered with fewer resources and more rapidly. Due to the systematic and transparent nature of an REA, bias is kept to a minimum, allowing others to replicate the review. For further details regarding REA methods, see the **rapid evidence assessment toolkit index.**

Scope

In line with the focus of the PRAP, this REA initially set out to explore what research exists on the adultification of black children in a policing context. However, pilot searches returned limited evidence, so the scope was expanded to include evidence on the adultification of children from any ethnic background in any policy context. While the scope was expanded, searches were still conducted to specifically retrieve evidence on black children and in the policing context, as part of the wider searches undertaken. This is described in greater detail in the **Search strategy** section.

The REA aimed to answer the following seven research questions:

1. How is adultification defined?
2. What explanations are given for adultification?
3. How does adultification manifest?
4. Where does adultification manifest?
5. What problems does adultification cause?
6. How do these problems have an impact on children?
7. What works to prevent and address adultification?

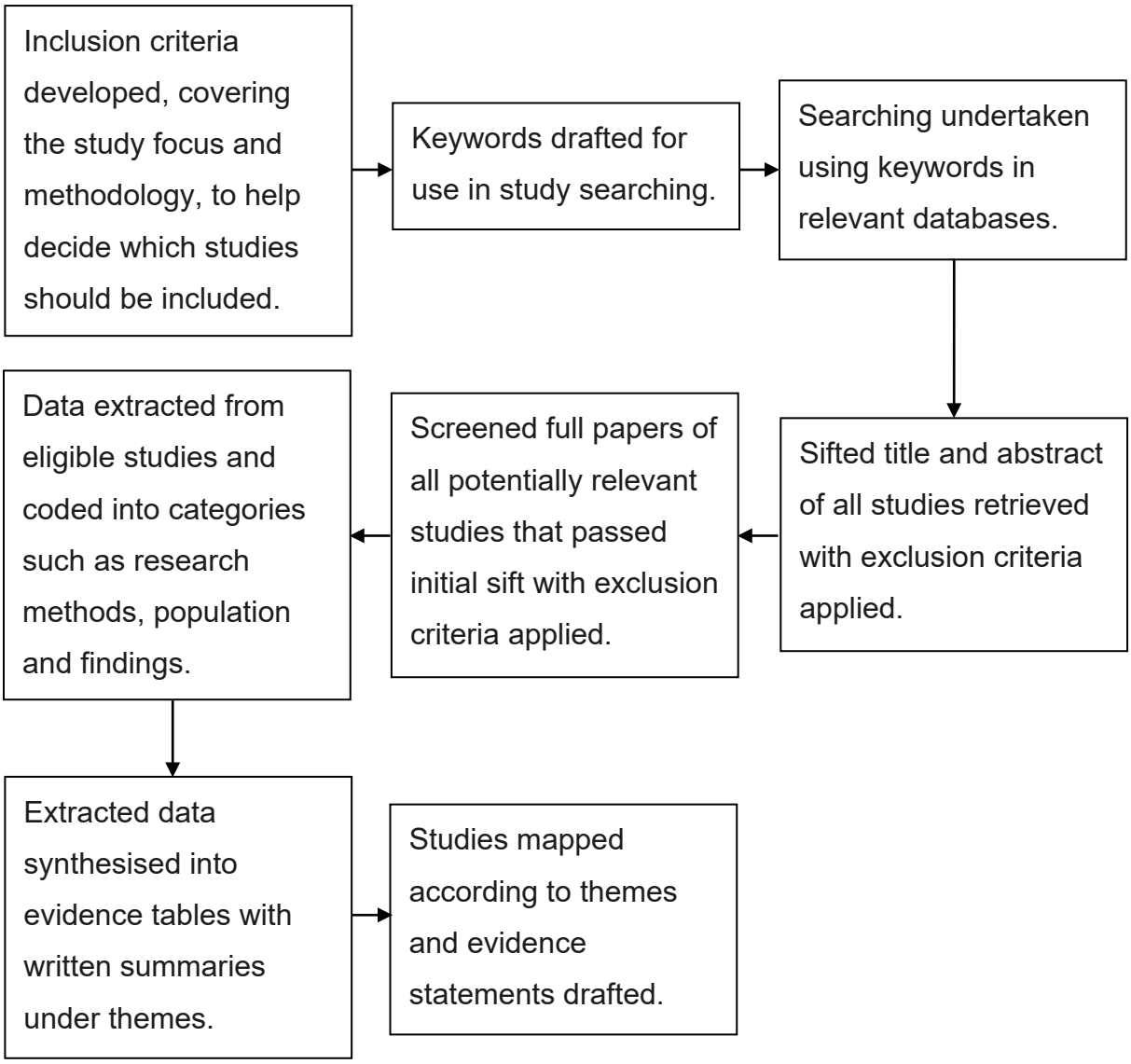
Review process

To ensure that the REA identified literature relevant to adultification, stakeholders with relevant subject matter expertise were consulted on the approach taken at key

stages. Stakeholders recommended references for inclusion in the review and provided feedback on the search strategy.

The protocol for the REA was developed after exploratory searches and discussions with stakeholders, and prior to beginning the systematic search and screening.

Figure 1: A flowchart showing the REA review process.



Search strategy

Different combinations of search terms were used to retrieve literature from databases of published research (see **appendix A** for the combinations used). The search terms focused on keywords directly and indirectly associated with adultification, such as safeguarding. Terminology describing adultification without using the specific term were also included, such as ‘adult-like’ and ‘perceived as older’, to help to ensure that the maximum amount of relevant evidence was

returned. The search terms also focused on population age to retrieve evidence on children.

The search terms were adapted to search for relevant grey literature on the websites of relevant organisations, by applying the keywords ‘adultification’ and ‘black children’. The searches were conducted between 12 and 19 June 2024 and returned 4,552 articles. **Appendix A** provides a summary of the search strategy.

Screening

The titles and abstracts of references were initially screened using agreed inclusion and exclusion criteria (n = 2,533). Grey literature searches returned few studies of relevance, so all were screened in, as were all reference suggestions from stakeholders (n = 52). Following the initial screening, 75 studies remained, which then went through full-text screening. The inclusion criteria were kept broad because the evidence base was expected to be limited.

Studies were included if they met all of the following criteria:

- the primary focus of the study was on adultification
- the study was a published primary study, systematic review, unpublished PhD thesis or relevant grey literature
- the study focused on children as the population
- the study was written in the English language
- the study had qualitative and/or quantitative data
- the study had an empirical basis

Duplicate references were removed. Purely theoretical studies and research notes were excluded. No parameters were placed on the situation that studies related to, the countries or areas they were conducted in, or a date period.

All references were screened by a single reviewer. A second reviewer quality assured the screening to ensure consistent application of the inclusion criteria. Any conflicts were resolved by a third reviewer.

Following full-text screening, 24 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review.

Data extraction

A detailed coding framework was used to extract all relevant information from each study for analysis. This included bibliographic details, methodology and key findings relevant to the research questions (see **appendix B** for the data extraction framework).

A single reviewer coded all 24 eligible studies. A second reviewer then quality assured the data extraction to ensure consistent application of the coding framework and to check agreement in interpretation of the coding. Any uncertainty was resolved through discussion with a third reviewer.

Synthesis

The evidence from the review studies was synthesised using thematic analysis. Codes were inductively generated from the data to identify and group relevant findings into themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes were refined and reviewed iteratively to identify the most important and prevalent. The evidence was presented around the seven research questions above (see the **Scope** section).

Literature flow

Figure 2: A flowchart showing the inclusion of studies in the review.

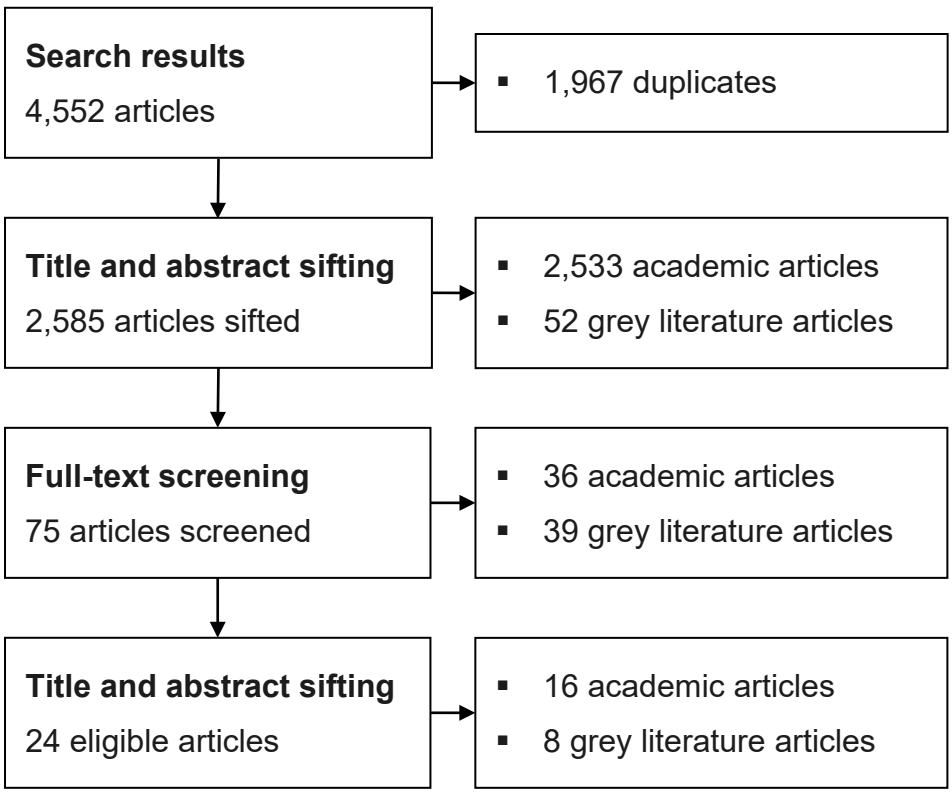


Figure 2 shows the flow of studies through the review process. A total of 4,552 references were identified through systematic searches of academic and grey literature databases. After screening, data was extracted and synthesised from 24 eligible studies.

Study characteristics

Ethnicity

Half of the 24 included studies focused on the adultification of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (n = 12). Nine of these studies focused on black children, while three focused on children from other ethnic minority backgrounds. The other half focused on the adultification of children more broadly (n = 12).

Gender

Half of the included studies focused on both female and male children (n = 12), while the remainder focused on either only female children (n = 7) or only male children (n = 5).

Study context

The included studies were focused on a wide range of contexts:

- adultification in general (n = 5)
- policing (n = 5)
- socioeconomically disadvantaged families (n = 5)
- broader criminal justice system (n = 2)
- education (n = 2)
- social care system (n = 2)
- healthcare (n = 1)
- serious case review involving multiple organisations (n = 1)
- social media (n = 1).

Study type

The majority of included studies were exploratory research on adultification (n = 23). One included study conducted an evaluation using a before-and-after design.

Research methods

The largest proportion of included studies used quantitative methods (n = 11). All these studies collected survey data. Just under half of the included studies used qualitative methods (n = 10). Most of these studies conducted interviews (n = 7).

The remainder conducted focus groups, made observations or used qualitative social media data. One study was a serious case review – these are statutory reviews of a case where children have died or come to serious harm and abuse, or neglect is known or suspected. Two studies used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Research location

The largest proportion of included studies were conducted in the USA (n = 19). The remainder were conducted in England and Wales (n = 2), Canada (n = 2) and more than one country (USA and Canada, n = 1).

Publication type

Most included studies were journal articles (n = 14). The remainder were either reports (n = 5) or theses (n = 5).

Publication date

Over half of the included studies were published between 2007 and 2022 (n = 13). The remainder were published between 2023 and 2024 (n = 11).

Appendix C provides a summary of the included studies.

Limitations

Overall, the strength of research evidence included in the REA is considered weak and should be used with caution when being used to inform policy and practice.

As adultification is a relatively new area of study, limited evidence was found. There was a lack of high-quality and relevant studies, particularly evaluations of interventions and research carried out in a policing context. Some studies were small scale and/or unable to produce findings that were generalisable beyond the specific research contexts.

Much of the evidence identified was not carried out in the UK, so it may not be transferrable to a policing context in England and Wales. Studies heavily focused on black children and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. There are potentially other contexts and group's experiences not explored that could offer alternative insights. Further research to address the overall paucity of evidence should also be considered.

The included studies lacked consistency in terms of how adultification was defined and measured, which could have affected the consistency of findings across studies. Most of the studies did not look to establish causal links between adultification and outcomes. Adultification is an assumed process, so underlying mechanisms for how and why adultification occurs are also unclear. Many studies lacked clarity – or could only speculate – on the extent to which adultification played a role in the problems experienced by children, often because they did not control for other variables.

Findings

Definitions of adultification

Most studies included in the REA discussed definitions of adultification (21 out of 24).[1-11,13,15,16,18-24] The authors cited earlier literature and/or provided their own definitions. The studies defined adultification in the following three ways:

- children perceived or treated as adults
- children perceived as older and/or more mature than their age
- children adopting adult roles and responsibilities

Children perceived or treated as adults

Studies most frequently defined adultification as the process of perceiving or treating children as adults (14 out of 21),[1-4,6,8,9,11,13,16,19-21,23] which included the following:

- perceiving children, particularly black children, to have adult-like characteristics
- viewing them as responsible as an adult for their actions
- not treating them like children

Children perceived as older and/or more mature than their age

Around half of the studies defined adultification as the process of perceiving children as older and/or more mature than their actual age. This included presuming younger children, in some cases specifically black children, to be as cognitively and physically developed as older children (12 out of 21).[2,4,6,9,10,13,16,19-21,23,24]

Children adopting adult roles and responsibilities

Around half of the studies defined adultification as the process by which children adopted adult roles and responsibilities (12 out of 21).[1,4,5,7,8,10,15,18,19,22-24]

This included children, often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds:

- undertaking tasks and activities that would normally be done by adults within their family networks
- being exposed to content of an adult nature
- having – or being perceived to have – knowledge about adult topics, such as sex

How adultification can manifest

Most studies included in the REA explored how adultification manifests (20 out of 24).[1,2,4-11,13-16,18-20,22-24]

The study findings can be categorised into two themes:

- overestimation of children's age
- children taking on adult roles or treated as adults

Overestimation of children's age

Two-thirds of the studies explored overestimation of a children's age as a manifestation of adultification (13 out of 20).[1-4,6-8,10,14,16,19,20,24]

All these studies looked at differences in how children's age was perceived according to ethnicity. All but one of the studies[6] found that black children were often perceived as older than white children. In three studies,[7,10,16] the overestimation of age was specifically related to black girls.

One US-based study[14] found that when making scenario-based judgements within a criminal justice context, police officers and university students perceived black boys

suspected of crimes as being older than white boys suspected of crimes. This was true irrespective of the crime severity.

However, another USA-based study[24] did not find a consistent pattern when community members made judgements on the age of children in scenarios involving the police using force against them. The study found that:

- while 12-year-old black girls were perceived as older than 12-year-old white girls, this was not the case for 13 or 14-year-olds
- 13-year-old white girls were perceived as older than 13-year-old black girls
- there were no ethnic differences in age estimation for 14-year-old girls

Three USA-based studies[19,20,24] also explored differences in community members' age overestimation of children in scenarios involving use of force or school dress code violations by sex. All three studies found that girls were perceived as older than boys.

One USA-based study[4] explored students' age estimation of photos of children more broadly and found that children were typically perceived as older than their age.

Children taking on adult roles or treated as adults

Just under half of the studies explored children's experiences of being treated like adults as a manifestation of adultification (8 out of 20).[5,9,13,15,16,18,22,23] Six of these studies[5,15,16,18,22,23] explored black people's lived experiences of growing up and/or people's experiences of growing up in lower socioeconomic circumstances within the USA. The studies found that children, often black children, had adopted adult roles and responsibilities, including:

- contributing financially to the family
- taking on parental roles
- having to confront and deal with challenges requiring maturity beyond their years
- acquiring knowledge in advance of their age

The remaining two studies[9,13] found that the perception that black children were in less need of support and protection meant that safeguarding expected to be in place for children was often not prioritised, inadequate or not in place. These findings came

from a Canadian study exploring people's lived experiences of transitioning out of the child welfare system and a UK-based serious case review.

Explanations for adultification

Most studies included in the REA discussed possible explanations for adultification (21 out of 24).[1,2,5-12,14-24] The authors cited earlier literature and/or suggested their own explanations. The studies saw adultification as resulting from the following two factors:

- racial bias leading to discrimination
- socioeconomic disadvantage.

Racial bias leading to discrimination

Studies most frequently discussed racial bias leading to discrimination as an explanation for the adultification of black children (17 out of 22).[1,2,5-12,14,16,17,19-21,24]

These studies described how historical racism may result in stereotypes, often of black adults, being imposed onto black children. In four studies,[1,8,16,24] three of which were USA-based, this was described in relation to black girls – for example, being perceived as promiscuous or dominating. Two USA-based studies[12,17] explained that some children may be perceived as older than their actual age because of the earlier onset of puberty. Furthermore, one of these studies[12] suggested that white boys may be afforded childlike qualities, while black boys may be held to more adult-like standards, such as being:

- perceived to be lacking innocence
- held more responsible for their actions due to perceptions of increased physical build and height.

Six studies,[9,10,11,14,20,24] from a range of countries, hypothesised about the relationship between the adultification of black children and dehumanisation. Dehumanisation is the process of depriving individual people, or groups of people, of human qualities or attributing fewer human qualities to them. These studies had mixed views. Two studies[9,24] suggested that adultification may lead to dehumanisation, while two other studies[10,11] felt that adultification itself is a form of dehumanisation. One study[14] suggested that dehumanisation may lead to

adultification, while another study[20] said the concepts may be linked but provided no further detail on this.

Socioeconomic disadvantage

Around a third of the studies discussed socioeconomic disadvantage as an explanation for adultification (8 out of 22).[1,5,7,15,16,18,22,23]

These USA-based studies explained that children may take on adult roles out of necessity for some families to function due to the socioeconomic strain they face. In these circumstances, children may feel pressure to support their parents by contributing financially or taking on caregiving roles. Four studies[16,18,22,23] noted that children may take on adult roles due to insufficient caregiving provided by adults around them or because of life transitions. These included parental divorce, entering foster care or homelessness.

Problems associated with adultification

All but one of the studies included in the REA explored the problems that may be associated with adultification (23 out of 24).[2-24]

Their findings can be categorised into the following themes:

- effect on perceptions of black children
- lack of appropriate support and safeguarding from adults
- effect on the response or punishment children received
- effect on children's educational and social functioning

Effect on perceptions of black children

Just over half of the studies explored the link between black children's age being overestimated due to bias and perceptions towards them (13 out of 23).[2,3,6-8,10,12,14,16,17,19-21]

Most of the studies reported that when black children's age was overestimated due to bias, they were also perceived more negatively by other people.[2,3,6,7,8,10,12,14,16,19,20]

People who showed this bias included community members, police officers, social care professionals, teachers and students. The studies described these people as:

- assuming criminality and culpability of black children

- holding punitive attitudes towards black children
- viewing black children as angrier

A few USA-based studies also found that black girls were subject to hyper-sexualisation.[2,7,8,19] In one of these studies,[7] black women described lived experiences of people assuming they were sexually active while growing up. In another study,[19] community members assumed black girls to be more sexually experienced than their white peers.

In one USA-based study,[2] black children described lived experiences of interactions with the police and being expected to know how the criminal justice system works. This included knowing their rights and responsibilities. In the same study,[2] black girls reported being sexualised by male police officers, who addressed them inappropriately, such as referring to them as “a pretty little thing”.

In contrast, two studies[17,21] found that black children’s age being overestimated did not affect community members’ or students’ perceptions of the children’s:

- blameworthiness
- likelihood to offend in the future
- dangerousness
- culpability
- amenability to treatment

Lack of appropriate support and safeguarding from adults

Around half of the studies reported that children who experienced adultification lacked appropriate support and safeguarding from adults around them (11 out of 23).[3,5,7-9,13,15,16,18,22,23]

These studies, which were from a range of countries and contexts, found that black children were not given the opportunity to receive the help and support they needed when either:

- their age was overestimated due to bias
- they took on adult roles due to their socioeconomic circumstances

Many of these studies[3,8,9,13,16,18,22] reported instances where:

- signs of exploitation and vulnerability were not recognised

- children were left vulnerable to exploitation because no appropriate adult was present
- children spent excessive time alone and had to navigate life and protect themselves

In one study,[16] adultification experts from a range of countries reported that black girls may be perceived as resilient because they lacked support, rather than recognising that they were forced to be resilient because of this.

Seven studies,[3,5,7,8,15,22,23] from a range of countries, frequently found that when children took on adult roles due to their socioeconomic circumstances, they were not developmentally ready for them and had to use legal or illegal means to meet their families' needs. These studies mostly focused on black people's lived experiences and/or experiences of people growing up in lower socioeconomic circumstances.

These studies also described children taking on these roles and associated responsibilities with varying levels of supervision from adults. Some children navigated their adult roles and looked after themselves independently. One USA-based study[5] found that children adopted adult gender roles. While boys tended to report providing financially, girls described taking on home-based, caregiver roles.[5] The studies said that part of taking on adult roles often also involved children being exposed to violence and adult content, including experiencing traumatic loss, drugs, addiction and sexual situations in their day-to-day lives.

Effect on the response or punishment children received

Around half of the studies explored the link between children's age being overestimated due to bias and the response or punishment children received (11 out of 23).[2-4,10,13,14,16,17,20,21,24]

Over half of these studies found that when black children were subject to adultification, they also received harsher responses and punishment.[2, 3,10,13,14,16,20]

Of these studies, three[2,13,20] related to the policing context. Two USA-based studies[2,13] described black children's lived experiences of excessive police force used against them. One USA-based study[2] reported differences in responses according to sex. Black girls who experienced adultification during interactions with the police often described this leading to sexual violence and harassment from the

police. Black boys described these interactions leading to excessive use of force or threats of violence. Black children also said they were:

- frequently put in holding cells with adults because police stations did not have separate facilities
- not checked on for hours
- rarely offered the chance to learn from their mistakes and be rehabilitated

In one case, a responsible adult was not informed of the child's arrest, which led them to believe the child had gone missing.

A USA, scenario-based study[20] found that community members perceived the force used as being less severe and more justified towards black children subject to adultification. This study also found that age overestimation was associated with reduced perceptions of physical and emotional harm caused to children during encounters with the police.

Harsher responses and punishment were also reported in a USA, scenario-based study.[14] This study found that as police officers' overestimation of black boys' ages increased, so did the force they used against them.

The four studies that did not relate to the policing context[3,10,13,16] described black children who were subject to adultification also receiving harsher responses and punishment in other contexts. This included disciplinary responses from authority figures in schools, social care and/or the criminal justice system, instead of a child-protection response.

In contrast, three studies[17,21,24] had mixed findings on whether adultification had an effect on the response or punishment children received. One USA, scenario-based study[17] found that increased maturity had limited impact on the punishments given. Community members did not give harsher monetary fines, warnings or prison sentencing to children whose photos were altered to make them look more mature. However, they were more likely to call the police on these children.

Another USA-based study[21] evaluated the impact that the language used to describe defendants had on judgements made about them. Students perceived boys described as juveniles as being more mature than those described as children. However, there were no differences in maturity perception according to ethnicity.

Students gave harsher punishments to boys described as juveniles compared to those described as children.

Additionally, a USA, scenario-based study[24] found that community members perceived force used as more justified towards children they perceived as older. However, there were no differences according to ethnicity. Age estimation had no effect on perceptions of force severity.

One USA-based study[4] found no association between student's perception of children's age and the responses or punishment the children received at school.

Effect on children's educational and social functioning

One USA-based study[4] explored the link between adultification and children's educational and social functioning (1 out of 23). No association was found between student's age perceptions of children and the children's exam results or social competency at interacting with other children.

How problems caused by adultification can affect children

Just under half of the included studies explored how problems associated with adultification can affect children (10 out of 24).[2,3,5,7,9,13,15,16,22,23]

All these studies reported adultification having negative effects on children's wellbeing, particularly for black children. This was true regardless of whether adultification was experienced by either:

- children's age being overestimated due to bias
- children taking on adult roles due to their socioeconomic circumstances

The studies found that children felt:

- overwhelmed
- abandoned
- pressured to be strong and independent
- unable to rely on adults
- in some cases, low feelings of safety and trust and confidence towards the police and other professionals involved in their care

The studies also reported children experiencing symptoms of trauma. These symptoms had long-lasting, adverse effects over time, often enduring into their adult lives. In two studies,[2,7] based in the Canada and USA, black girls described their age being overestimated and subsequently feeling shame and uncomfortable in their bodies as a result of being sexualised. Some reported acting, speaking and dressing differently to try and appear younger.

In addition to negative effects, five studies[3,5,15,18,23] also described positive effects reported by children who experienced adultification by taking on adult roles due to their socioeconomic circumstances. Three of these USA-based studies[5,15,23] reported that children had feelings of pride and independence, which they felt had equipped them to handle their transition to adulthood or parenting. In other studies, children described having increased resilience[3,5] and decreased depressive symptoms when they reported greater adultification.[18]

However, while one study[5] found positive effects of adultification on the development of competent life skills, this was at the expense of school attendance and performance. Additionally, while children often described feeling a strong sense that they mattered to their families and were needed and appreciated, they also suffered with anxiety and depression because of their adult responsibilities.

Conclusion

The evidence included in the REA is limited in terms of research design, quality and generalisability. These limitations mean that, while emerging issues could be identified from the evidence, strong conclusions could not be drawn. Caution must be taken when interpreting the findings because the evidence does not establish whether adultification is a cause or consequence. Additionally, adultification is an assumed process. It is unclear whether children have been treated inappropriately because of adultification and/or other issues, and to what extent different factors have contributed to this.

The evidence reported that adultification can affect any child. Nearly all the studies found evidence of black children and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing adultification. While it is possible that these groups of children may be at greater risk of experiencing adultification than other children, this conclusion is not substantiated by the research that is currently available because of

its limitations. A key issue is that the research almost exclusively focused on these groups, which prevents comparison. There are potentially other contexts and group's experiences not explored that could offer alternative insights.

Included studies cited earlier literature and/or provided their own definitions of adultification. Definitions included:

- perceiving or treating children as adults and/or more mature than their actual age
- children adopting adult roles

Studies explored how adultification can manifest and found evidence of:

- children's ages being overestimated
- children taking on adult roles or being treated as adults, with associated roles and responsibilities to fulfil

Studies explored problems that may be associated with adultification and reported that children subject to adultification, either by their age being overestimated due to bias and/or taking on adult roles due to their socioeconomic circumstances, often lacked appropriate support and safeguarding from adults around them, which left children:

- vulnerable
- at risk of exploitation
- having limited help with the adult roles they adopted

Additionally, studies reported that when black children's ages were overestimated due to bias, they were frequently perceived more negatively by other people, such as community members and police officers. Negative perceptions included assuming criminality, culpability and holding punitive attitudes towards black children. Black children also tended to receive harsher punishments or responses when their age was overestimated. Studies explored how problems caused by adultification can affect children and described negative, long-lasting effects on children's wellbeing, often enduring into their adult lives.

Implications for practice

Policing and wider sectors can make use of the insights from the evidence to review and understand how adultification presents in their respective areas and what action

is required to address this. In line with the Children and Young Person's Policing Strategy (2024), the evidence summary raises the following implications for practice for policing and wider sectors to focus on:

- Ensure that people under the age of 18 years are perceived and treated as children.
- Ensure that children are provided with a child-protection response that reduces harm.
- Comprehensively identify children's needs and vulnerabilities, so that opportunities for early intervention to prevent negative consequences are capitalised on and escalation is prevented.
- Consider and prevent potential bias towards assumed levels of maturity and age, particularly when policing black children and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Recognise when children's circumstances have resulted in them inappropriately undertaking adult roles and responsibilities, and appropriately safeguard them.

Future research

While there is evidence on the existence, manifestation and effects of adultification, interventions that aim to prevent or address adultification have rarely been implemented and studied. There is an argument for policing and wider sectors to be innovative and start implementing and testing such practices.

There is a need to expand the research on adultification, particularly to understand whether the findings, predominantly from USA-based studies, are transferable to England and Wales. Research is also needed to understand what works to prevent and address adultification, for whom, under which circumstances and why. This would help policing and wider sectors to develop and implement more effective strategies for reducing adultification.

Future research should consider using experiments to explore the effectiveness of interventions at reducing adultification. Robust data collection and analysis will be key to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives. Collecting relevant data before and after interventions would help to measure changes brought about by the initiatives. Longitudinal data analysis could also help to track progress over time and establish the longer-term impact of the interventions. Qualitative measures, such as

insights from interviews, would complement quantitative measures. This would provide more in-depth understanding of children's perceptions and experiences of adultification, the success of interventions and areas for improvement.

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Appendix A: Search strategy

Key terms

The key terms below were used to search academic databases.

Row 1 (major key words)

Adultification OR “adultification bias” OR “childhood adultification” OR adulteri*ing OR adultifying OR “emotional adultification” OR parentification OR “mentored-adultification” OR peerification OR spousification OR “older treat*” OR “adult treat*” OR “adult-like” OR “more grown” OR “perceived as older” OR “older than*” OR “inappropriate to their age” OR “inappropriate for their age” OR “less innocen*” OR “innocence and vulnerability are not afforded”

Row 2 (closely related key words)

Safeguarding OR “child welfare” OR “child protection” OR “child* rights” OR “child needs” OR “Child Q” OR “Child C” OR “process of socialisation”

Row 3 (audience – population age)

Child* OR youth OR young* OR boy* OR girl* OR adolescent OR teen* OR juvenile OR minor OR kid* OR junior*

Row 4 (audience – population ethnicity)

black* OR “mixed black” OR African OR Caribbean OR race OR racial OR ethnic OR ethnicity OR “people of colo*r”

Row 5 (situation – policing)

Police OR policing OR “law enforcement” OR “criminal justice” OR “missing persons” OR “missing people” OR “victim response” OR “use of force” OR “police powers” OR “stop and search” OR “excessive force” OR “police force”

Search combinations

The search combinations below were used to search academic databases:

- rows 1 and 2
- rows 1 and 2 and 3

- rows 1 and 2 and 4
- rows 1 and 2 and 3 and 4
- rows 1 and 3 and 4
- rows 1 and 3 and 5
- rows 1 and 3 and 4 and 5
- rows 1 and 4
- rows 1 and 4 and 5
- rows 1 and 5

The following search terms were not used because they either returned no studies, or an unmanageably high number of studies, in the pilot searches.

- rows 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 5
- rows 1 and 2 and 5
- rows 1 and 3

Academic databases

The academic databases below were searched.

- EBSCOhost
- National Police Library
- ProQuest
- Scopus – excluding the following search combinations, given the unmanageable and less relevant articles returned:
  - rows 1 and 3 and 4
  - rows 1 and 3 and 5
  - rows 1 and 4
  - rows 1 and 5
- Web of Science

Searches were not conducted on Emerald because pilot searches returned no articles.

Grey literature websites

The websites of the organisations below were searched for relevant grey literature.

- Children's Commissioner
- The Children's Society
- College of Policing
- Commission on Young Lives
- Early Intervention Foundation
- Education Endowment Foundation – What Works Centre for Educational Achievement
- Foundations – What Works Centre for Children and Families
- GOV.UK
- Local Government Association
- Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC)
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) – What Works Centre for Health and Social Care
- National Library of Medicine
- NHS Library
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Library
- Victims' Commissioner
- Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP)
- What Works Centre for Wellbeing
- Youth Endowment Fund – What Works Centre for Youth Offending
- Youth Futures Foundation

Appendix B: Data extraction framework

The data extraction framework was designed in Microsoft Excel.

Data extraction framework points

1. **Title**
2. **Authors**
3. **Year published**
4. **Journal, book, organisation or conference detail**
5. **Study location** (select one)
    a. England and Wales
    b. Scotland
    c. Northern Ireland
    d. Other Europe
    e. USA
    f. Canada
    g. Australia
    h. South Africa
    i. More than one country
    j. Other (provide details)
6. **Publication type**
    a. Journal article
    a. Report
    b. Dissertation or thesis
    c. Book chapter
    d. Book
    e. Conference paper or proceedings
    f. Other (provide details)
7. **Time period studied:** Describe the time period of the research.
8. **Study methodology**

a. Quantitative
b. Qualitative
c. Mixed methods
d. Safeguarding review

9. **Study type** (select one)
   a. Exploratory research
   b. Randomised controlled trial
   c. Before-and-after study with comparison groups (quasi-experimental)
   d. Before-and-after study without comparison groups
   e. After measures only
   f. Other assessment of intervention (for example, process evaluation)
10. **Study data collected** (select all that apply)
   a. Survey
   b. Interviews
   c. Focus groups
   d. Ethnography or observations
   e. Administrative data
   f. Quantitative data (provide details)
   g. Other (provide details)
11. **Study context** (select one)
   a. Education
   b. Healthcare
   c. Policing
   d. Broader criminal justice system
   e. General – no specific context
   f. Safeguarding
   g. Social care system
   h. Violence against women and girls
   i. Other (please specify)

12. **Study focus on black children** (select one)
    a. Black children only
    b. Children from ethnic minority backgrounds, including black children
    c. Children from other ethnic minority backgrounds, excluding black children
    d. Children more broadly – no focus on ethnicity
13. **Sample:** Describe the primary target group of the research. Provide specific details of age, gender and location, where possible (for example, young males in USA city).
14. **Theoretical perspective**
    a. Describe how the study defines adultification.
    b. What explanation does the study provide for why adultification occurs? For example, because of dehumanisation.
15. **Presentation**
    a. Describe how the adultification of children presents. For example, perceptions of children being older.
    b. Describe where the adultification of children presents. For example, in schools when children are disciplined.
16. **Consequences**
    a. Describe what problems adultification causes.
    b. Describe how these problems impact children.
17. **Interventions**
    a. An intervention was delivered.
    b. An intervention was not delivered, but an intervention was suggested.
    c. The study makes no reference to interventions.

Where an intervention was delivered

18. **Intervention description:** Describe the intervention. What did it involve? What were the main activities?
19. **Who delivered the intervention?**
    a. Police force

b. Police organisation or national body (for example, College of Policing)
c. Other government body (for example, Justice Department)
d. Non-government organisation
e. Combination of the above
f. Other organisation (provide details)

20. Where was the intervention implemented?

a. Police force
b. Other public sector context
c. Within a healthcare setting
d. In a school
e. Other organisation (provide details)

21. Intervention sample: How was the target group selected for the intervention? Describe the sample of the evaluation or assessment, including recruitment and sample size.

22. Study outcomes measured (select all that apply):

a. Perception of age
b. Perception of innocence
c. Perception of responsibility
d. Perception on the appropriate use of police powers
e. Perception of victimisation
f. Dehumanisation of children
g. Other outcome (provide details)

23. Overall impact of intervention

a. Largely positive
b. Largely negative
c. Mixed
d. No impact
e. Impact not examined

24. **Effect:** Describe the effect or impact of any intervention on the target group. How effective was the intervention?
25. **Mechanism (facilitators):** Describe any facilitators that were shown to positively impact the effect of the intervention.
26. **Mechanism (barriers):** Describe any barriers that were shown to negatively impact the effect of the intervention.
27. **Moderator (facilitator):** Describe any contextual factors that were shown to positively impact the effect of the intervention. Describe any details of who the intervention worked best for (for example, demographics, prior experiences).
28. **Moderator (barriers):** Describe any contextual factors that were shown to negatively impact the effect of the intervention. Describe any details of who the intervention worked least well for (for example, demographics, prior experiences).
29. **Implementation:** Describe how the intervention was implemented, the support that was provided (and by whom) and any other relevant information about the implementation of the intervention.
30. **Economic costs:** Describe the resources involved and the costs of the intervention (if reported).
31. **Miscellaneous:** Any additional or noteworthy information from the study.

Appendix C: Summary of included studies

Table 1: Included studies' bibliographic information.

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
1	To be a child without the protections of innocence: The repercussions of the adultification of black youth by school teachers in the United States education system	Adekeye, 2019	USA, mixed methods exploratory research	Education: perceptions of black and white children and punishment	Primary and secondary school teachers	115
2	"I feel like I was targeted:" Black youth navigating policing in Ontario, Canada	Akuoko-Barfi and others, 2023	Canada, qualitative exploratory research	Policing: lived experiences of interactions with the police	Black children and adults	47
3	Listening to black women and girls: Lived experiences of adultification bias	Blake and Epstein, 2019	USA, qualitative exploratory research	General: lived experiences and perceptions on adultification	Black girls and women	Not given

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
4	Adults' perceptions of children's age: Implications for child development	Bridgewater, 2023	USA, quantitative exploratory research	General: perceptions of Latino, multiracial, black and white children	University students	400
5	Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families: A conceptual model	Burton, 2007	USA, qualitative exploratory research	Socioeconomic disadvantage: ethnographies exploring adultification within low-income families	Families	549
6	Adultification, anger bias, and adults' different perceptions of black and white children	Cooke and Halberstadt, 2021	USA, quantitative exploratory research	General: perceptions of black and white children	Parents of at least one child	152
7	Growing up too "fast": Black girls' sexual development	Crooks and others, 2023	USA, qualitative exploratory research	Healthcare: lived experiences of sexual development	Girls from ethnic minority backgrounds	20

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
8	Transmuting girls into women: Examining the adultification of black female sexual assault survivors through Twitter feedback	Curtis, Karlsen and Anderson, 2023	USA, qualitative exploratory research	Social media: response to the 'Surviving R Kelly' documentary	Tweets on Twitter (now 'X')	1,542
9	Pushed, dropped, or fleeing from care: The narratives and adultification of black youth who have aged out of Ontario's child welfare system	Edwards and others, 2024	Canada, qualitative exploratory research	Social care: lived experiences of adultification when leaving the social care system	Black children and adults	27
10	Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of black girls' childhood	Epstein, Blake and González, 2017	USA, quantitative exploratory research	General: perceptions of black and white girls	General public – adults	325

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
11	Forgotten voices: Policing, stop and search and the perspectives of black children	Evans and others, 2022	England and Wales, mixed methods exploratory research	Policing: perspectives and experiences on stop and search	Survey – nationally representative sample of children Focus group – children who had knowledge or lived experience of stop and search	Survey: 1,542 Focus groups: 25
12	A race-based size bias for black adolescent boys: Size, innocence, and threat	Freiburger and others, 2023	USA, quantitative exploratory research	General: perceptions of black and white boys	General public – adults	Study 1a: 61 1b: 51 2a: 73 2b: 236 3: 98 4a: 188 4b: 261

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
13	Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review – Child Q	Gamble and McCallum, 2022	England and Wales, N/A	Multidisciplinary context: Serious case review	A black female child	1
14	The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing black children	Goff and others, 2014	USA, quantitative exploratory research	Policing: perceptions of black, white and Latino boys	Study 1 – university students Study 2 – university students Study 3a – police officers Study 3b – police officers Study 4 – university students	Study 1: 123 Study 2: 59 Study 3a: 60 Study 3b: 116 Study 4: 82

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
15	Perceptions of the transition to adulthood for socioeconomically disadvantaged young black men	Golojuch, 2015	USA, qualitative exploratory research	Socioeconomic disadvantage: lived experiences of adultification while growing up	Black boys and men	21
16	The adultification of black girls in state care: Perspectives	Ikomi, 2023	USA, Canada, England and Wales, qualitative exploratory research	Social care: perceptions and experiences of the adultification of black girls	Adultification expert	6
17	Same crime, same time? Differences in visual maturity affect opinions of adolescent culpability	Koch, Burd and Mendle, 2023	USA, quantitative exploratory research	Broader criminal justice system: perceptions of black and white children and punishment	General public – adults	Study 1: 396 Study 2: 386

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
18	Urban African American adolescents and adultification	Nebbitt and Lombe, 2010	USA, quantitative exploratory research	Socioeconomic disadvantage: lived experiences of adultification while growing up in social housing	Black children and adults	238
19	“I am a child!”: Public perceptions of black girls and their punitive consequences	Nuamah and Mulroy, 2023	USA, quantitative exploratory research	Education: perceptions of black and white children and punishment	General public – adults	Study 1: 1,466 Study 2: 2,266
20	Examining the consequences of dehumanization and adultification in justification of police use of force against black girls and boys	Perillo and others, 2023	USA, quantitative exploratory research	Policing: perception of black and white children and use of force	General public – adults	342

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
21	Listening carefully: Disrupting adultification during the sentencing process	Rode, 2024	USA, after measures evaluation	Broader criminal justice system: perceptions of black and white boys and sentencing decisions	University students	195
22	Growing up as “man of the house”: Adultification and transition into adulthood for young men in economically disadvantaged families	Roy and others, 2014	USA, qualitative exploratory research	Socioeconomic disadvantage: Lived experiences of adultification in low income or single-parent households	Boys and men from ethnic minority backgrounds	41
23	Growing up before their time: The early adultification experiences of homeless young people	Schmitz and Tyler, 2016	USA, qualitative exploratory research	Socioeconomic disadvantage: lived experience of adultification while growing up	Homeless adults	40

ID	Study title	Author, year	Country, design	Context	Sample	Sample size
24	#SayHer(Young)Name: The relationship between dehumanization and perceptions of police violence against black girls	Sykes, 2022	USA, quantitative exploratory research	Policing: perceptions of black and white girls and use of force	General public - adults	136

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