

A White man was ‘scared to death’ of Ralph Yarl. For Black boys, this isn’t new.

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When [Ralph Yarl](#) rang the doorbell of Andrew Lester’s Kansas City, Mo., home by mistake last week, the 84-year-old White man was “scared to death,” he told police.

The Black teenager was looking for his two siblings who were playing at a friend’s house. Instead, he arrived at Lester’s door — one block off course. No words were exchanged, Lester told police, before he lifted his .32-caliber revolver and shot through a glass door at Yarl, hitting him in the head and arm.

Clay County Prosecuting Attorney Zachary Thompson said there was “a racial component” to Yarl’s shooting, though he didn’t explain why.

But researchers say Lester’s description of Yarl, who is 5-foot-8 and 140 pounds, according to his family, fits a pattern among shootings of young Black males. Lester said the teenager was a “Black male approximately 6 feet tall” — several inches off Yarl’s actual height, according to the criminal complaint. “Lester stated that it was the last thing he wanted to do, but he was ‘scared to death’ due to the male’s size.”

Similar language has been used in other cases, reflecting the fear people of other races sometimes feel upon seeing Black people, researchers say. In multiple studies, people who were asked to judge the size of Black people tended to see Black men as bigger and stronger than they actually were, and gave Black children the attributes of adults. The result is that they are seen as more dangerous, researchers say.

“This is another case where we see these questions of size and formidability [lead to] perceptions of dangerousness,” Kurt Hugenberg, a professor in psychological and brain sciences at Indiana University, said of Yarl.

When a police officer shot 12-year-old Tamir Rice in 2014, the president of the Cleveland Police Patrolmen's Association defended the officer describing Rice as "a 12-year-old in an adult body." Before George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin, 17, in 2012, Zimmerman called 911 and described the Black teen as "a guy who looks like he's up to no good or on drugs or something." And former Ferguson, Mo., police officer Darren Wilson, who fatally shot 18-year-old Michael Brown in 2014, likened the struggle inside his vehicle that preceded the deadly shooting to "a 5-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan."

The shooting of Yarl has become another flash point for a nation grappling with gun violence and for Black parents who fear the consequences of their children being viewed as older than they are and therefore potentially more dangerous. Yarl, who was released from the hospital Sunday, has spoken with President Biden. Hundreds of his classmates at a Kansas City high school, where he plays bass clarinet, walked out of class and marched through town yelling, "We love you, Ralph!"

Lester has been charged with two felonies, including first-degree assault, and faces up to life in prison. He pleaded not guilty on Wednesday and has been released on bond.

Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas (D), who is Black, said that since Yarl's shooting, he's questioned whether he would be in danger if he rang the doorbell at the wrong home at night. He's also thinking about what he will say to his 2-year-old son, Bennett, when he's old enough to understand the perception and fear some people have toward Black children.

"Before last Thursday, I don't know if there's a parent in America who would advise their child, White or Black, not to ring the doorbell," Lucas said. But that has changed, he said.

"People need to reassess their biases and fears and recognize that Black people are not villains, that Black kids are not a threat," he said. "There was no reason to fear this boy."

It's generally accepted that there's a distinction between children and adults and what can be expected of them, said Phillip Atiba Goff, chair of African American studies at Yale University. But Black children often aren't afforded that same grace as White children, he said.

In one study, researchers asked people to judge the perceived innocence of children and young people up to age 25. The Black children ranked as significantly less innocent than other children in every age group beginning at age 10, according to a study published by the American Psychological Association.

Black children are essentially "adultified" — treated older than their age, said Goff, co-founder of the Center for Policing Equity, a research center that studies race and policing. "They're held more responsible for their behavior than their same-age peers," he said. "And it's assumed that they should be punished more severely as a result of all of that."

Goff added that while he can't say for sure that the shooting of Yarl was a case of "adultification," the teenager "looks like he's 16" in photos.

These types of incidents keep Black families on guard, whether a child is going to the store to buy candy like Martin when he was killed or picking up their siblings like Yarl, Goff said. “For parents of a Black child, as I am myself, to have to explain, ‘Hey, it’s not fair, but the world thinks this way of you’ ... it’s a crushing thing to have to explain to a child,” he said.

Goff’s son is 6 months old. “I haven’t had the talk yet,” he said.

The fear some people feel upon seeing a Black face has been documented in studies and investigations for years, experts say. One of the White men who lynched Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955 testified that the 14-year-old Black teen, who was about 5-foot-5 and weighed about 160 pounds, “looked like a man.”

Racial stereotypes about Black people appearing bigger, stronger and more formidable tend to result in White people viewing them as dangerous regardless of the reality of their size, said Hugenberg, the Indiana University professor. In some studies, Hugenberg showed participants images of Black men and White men who are about the same height and weight. Participants often thought the Black men appeared larger, he said.

There is “a tendency for both White and Black Americans to perceive Black men as bigger than comparable White men. But this effect was stronger amongst White participants,” Hugenberg said. And unlike Black research participants, White people who inflated the size of Black men also tended to believe that Black people “were more likely to cause harm and be more dangerous.”

“We can be quite confident that these effects aren’t driven by an accurate perception that the Black people that we’re showing to participants are bigger, but rather they’re about how stereotypes distort the way we see the world,” Hugenberg said.

Another study, led by UCLA psychologist Jenessa Shapiro, found that White people were more likely to perceive facial expressions as being threatening if those expressions came from a Black man. “White participants failed to reduce their judgments of threat when a (neutral) Black male face followed an angry Black male face,” according to the study, which was published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. “Indeed, after viewing an initial same-race angry face, Black males were seen as more threatening than White males, even though the faces were pretested to be equivalently neutral.”

Yarl’s relatives and civil rights activists have denounced Lester’s remarks to police about the fear the boy inspired in him. Yarl is not the specter Lester described, they say. Instead, activists questioned whether Lester’s perceptions may have reflected racist assumptions about Black people.

“He’s a really sweet kid. ... He would not harm a fly,” Faith Spoonmore, Yarl’s aunt, said in a CBS News interview.

In the aftermath of Yarl’s shooting, the focus should not only be on curbing gun violence, but also on addressing the fear attached to Black men and boys, said Derrick Johnson, president of the NAACP. Otherwise, he said, “we have to tell our kids when it comes to ringing the doorbell to make sure they go to the right household.”

