

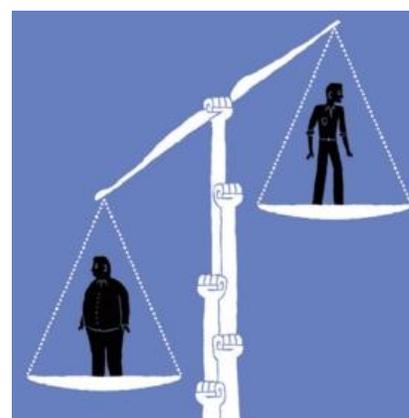
## Harsher Punishments for the Obese and Hippies

Groups that elicit disgust are judged more severely for "impure" acts

Feb 12, 2015 | By [Matthew Hutson](#) |

We like to think of our moral judgments as consistent, but they can be as capricious as moods. Research reveals that such judgments are swayed by incidental emotions and perceptions—for instance, people become more moralistic when they feel dirty or sense contamination, such as in the presence of moldy food. Now a series of studies shows that hippies, the obese and “trailer trash” suffer prejudicial treatment because they tend to elicit disgust.

Researchers asked volunteers to read short paragraphs about people committing what many consider to be impure acts, such as watching pornography, swearing or being messy. Some of the paragraphs described the individuals as being a hippie, obese or trailer trash—and the volunteers judged these fictional sinners more harshly, according to the paper in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. *Questionnaires revealed that feelings of disgust toward these groups were driving the volunteers' assessments.*



ADAM McCAULEY

ADVERTISEMENT

### Biased Punishment

Appearances matter in a court of law. Studies find that judges and jurors are swayed by a variety of physical features when they evaluate guilt or decide on punishments.

#### Attractiveness

Jurors tend to judge physically unattractive people more harshly for a crime. If, however, jurors think a person used his good looks to help him commit a crime, say, swindling old ladies out of their life savings, then attractiveness can have a negative impact on juror perception.

#### Facial maturity

Baby-faced adults are often viewed as innocent and honest and may be judged more leniently for intentional crimes, such as fraud and theft. But when a crime centers on negligence, such as a drunk-driving accident, they may be given harsher punishment.

#### Gender

People seem to judge their own sex more harshly than the opposite sex.

#### Race

Many studies reveal that nonwhite defendants receive more stringent punishments. One large, notable study found that the more stereotypically black a defendant appears, the more likely a jury will sentence the defendant to death—but only when the victim is white.

—Victoria Stern

A series of follow-up studies solidified the link, finding that these groups also garnered greater praise for purity-related virtues, such as keeping a neat cubicle. If the transgression in question did not involve purity, such as not tipping a waiter, the difference in judgment disappeared. “The assumption people have is that we draw on values that are universal and important,” says social psychologist E. J. Masicampo of Wake Forest University, who led the study, “but something like mentioning that a person is overweight can really push that judgment around. It’s triggering these gut-level emotions.”

The researchers also looked for real-world effects. After analyzing records of every New York City Police Department patrol stop from 2004 to 2013, they found that when suspects were stopped for purity violations (such as drugs, prostitution or lewdness), overweight people were more likely to be arrested or receive a summons. Each point increase in their body mass index increased the chances of punishment by 1 percent. Next Masicampo will test whether police make more purity arrests during flu season, with infection in mind.

Prior work shows that these un-conscious biases can lose their effect once made conscious. By alerting people to their purity prejudices, the researchers hope to bring about more equal treatment of those burdened by stigma. A fine aim because, after all, what is more disgusting than bigotry?

This article was originally published with the title "Harsher Punishments for the Obese."

Buy this digital issue or subscribe to access other articles from the March 2015 publication.

Already have an account? [Sign In](#)



Digital Issue  
\$5.99

[Add To Cart](#)

Digital Issue + Subscription  
\$39.99

[Subscribe](#)

### You May Also Like



Scientific American  
Mind Archive Single  
Issue



Scientific American  
Mind Archive Single  
Issue



Scientific American  
Mind Single Issue



Scientific American  
Mind Single Issue

### Recommended For You



[Sitting in Chairs Most of the Day Can Kill You, But a Little Standing Can Bring Back Your Health](#) 3 months ago [scientificamerican.com](#)  
[ScientificAmerican.com](#) The Science of Health

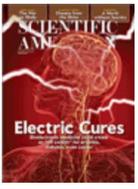


[Not Everyone Wants to Be Happy](#) 3 months ago [scientificamerican.com](#) [ScientificAmerican.com](#) More Science



[Coffee and Tea May Protect the Brain](#) a month ago [scientificamerican.com](#) [ScientificAmerican.com](#) Mind & Brain

**TRY A RISK-FREE ISSUE**



**YES!** Send me a free issue of Scientific American with no obligation to continue the subscription. If I like it, I will be billed for the one-year subscription.

[Subscribe Now](#)

Scientific American is a trademark of Scientific American, Inc., used with permission

© 2015 Scientific American, a Division of Nature America, Inc.

All Rights Reserved.