

Adultification evidence review

An up-to-date summary of the evidence on the adultification of black children in policing.

Key details

Lead institution	College of Policing
Principal researcher(s)	Alexa Reed and Sarah Colover alexa.reed@college.police.uk
Police region	West Midlands
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	January 2024

Research context

Children and young people are a protected group with specific vulnerabilities and there are rules and responsibilities to observe when policing them. When the rules and responsibilities on policing children are not observed, safeguarding which is in place to protect them is not adhered to. This can lead to decisions being made based on the presumption that a child is older than they are. The concept of adultification describes discrimination and bias where children are presumed to be older and less vulnerable compared to others.

The term adultification is often applied to black children and used to describe how biases lead to perceptions of children being more adult-like, resulting in discriminatory treatment. In such cases, services may overlook their needs and disregard their legal rights and safeguarding responsibilities. Several high-profile cases have illustrated this, such as the murder cases of two 14-year-old boys, [Chris in 2017](#) and [Child C in 2019](#), and the discriminatory and traumatic strip search of [Child Q in 2020](#). These children received a largely criminal justice and disciplinary response from the adults around them, rather than a child protection response. These events have resulted in senior police

leaders and policymakers reviewing how adultification presents in policing and what action is required to address this.

An up-to-date summary of the available evidence will enable the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) to fulfil its aim of the police service consistently using age-appropriate policing and to inform future related actions.

The evidence summary aims to enable statements to be made about:

- what research exists on the adultification of black children
- what this tells us about police practice
- whether interventions have been evaluated which try to address the adultification of black children

Research methodology

Evidence on the adultification of black children will be identified, reviewed, summarised and critically appraised.

Empirical studies carried out in a policing or law enforcement setting and other contexts such as education, healthcare and immigration will be identified, in addition to systematic reviews, rapid evidence assessments and/or meta-analyses of empirical studies carried out in any contexts.

The evidence summary will cover the following:

- The theoretical perspective explaining what adultification is and why it occurs, and specifically in relation to black children within the context of policing.
- The methods, findings, conclusions and limitations of empirical studies exploring the adultification of black children, in particular:
 - how adultification presents: how and where adultification presents in policing, and how this interacts with safeguards which are meant to be in place
 - the consequences of adultification: what problems adultification causes and how this impacts black children when they come into contact with the police
- A quality assessment of the studies included. If studies are found to use less robust research methods, suitable caveats will be placed alongside any presentation of findings.

- The methods, findings, conclusions, and limitations of evaluations testing the effectiveness of interventions implemented to identify adultification (for example, use of force or risk assessments) and targeted action aimed at addressing and reducing adultification.

The evidence summary will also include a view on the:

- Current state of the evidence base (for example, its strengths, weaknesses and gaps).
- The overall conclusions that can be drawn from the available research.
- Implications of the evidence for policing policy and practice (for example, where intervention may be appropriate to address adultification).

Findings

The project was completed in January 2026. For more information on the findings, go to the [full report in the National Police Library](#).