Science & Technology

The Psychology Behind Police Shootings

New Columbia research reveals brain mechanisms that may be at work when cops shoot unarmed Black men.

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It happens all too often in the US: A police officer shoots a Black man, believing he is armed, only to discover that he was holding an ordinary object like a cell phone

or wallet.

New laboratory experiments using advanced brain imaging may help explain why such tragedies occur. Columbia psychologist Jon Freeman found that adults asked to quickly identify harmless, everyday objects frequently mistook them for weapons when also shown a picture of a Black man's face. Imaging data revealed that the miscalculations occurred not in brain regions responsible for deliberate decision-making but rather in the brain's visual-processing centers, suggesting that racial stereotypes can actually alter what a person sees.

Freeman says the results could have implications for police training programs: In addition to helping officers recognize their racial biases, such programs may need to incorporate psychological exercises that subconsciously retrain the brain to perceive certain types of visual information more accurately. "We're eager to build on this research by exploring new interventions that might recalibrate biased visual perceptions," he says. "If we can change split-second perceptual distortions, we may be able to mitigate these kinds of consequential misjudgments in high-stakes situations under stress and uncertainty."

This article appears in the Winter 2025-26 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title "Seeing danger that isn't there."*

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