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Report: Execution likelier for darker murderers

Study finds link with stereotypical features in cases with white victims

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SAN FRANCISCO - The more "black looking" an African-American man charged with murdering a white victim, the more likely he is to be sentenced to death, a Stanford University researcher said Tuesday.

Using scores given by white and Asian-American Stanford undergraduates to rate facial features of 44 black men tried for murder in Philadelphia over 20 years, researchers found that 57.5 percent rated to have "stereotypically" black features such as dark skin were sentenced to death.

By contrast, 24.4 percent of black men in similar murder cases and rated by the students as less stereotypically black were sentenced to death, said Jennifer Eberhardt, a Stanford psychologist involved in the research.

Despite the use of ratings from only white and Asian-American students, the findings suggest jurors use stereotypes of black features as a proxy for criminality and punish murder defendants with those features more severely, Eberhardt said.

"They do link although the students have no knowledge of who they are or who they murdered," Eberhardt said, referring to the defendants, their features and their sentences.

Researchers also set ratings for facial features against a pool of 118 black men tried for murdering other blacks and found no relationship between their features and sentences.

"You could not use the features to predict whether they got a death sentence," Eberhardt said. "You're more likely to get a death sentence in the white cases than in the black cases."

The study adds to other research showing murderers of whites are more likely than murderers of blacks to be sentenced to death, Eberhardt said.