

Study participants favor whites over blacks for Katrina relief aid

Richard Morin, Washington Post

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Americans are more willing to provide extended government assistance to white victims of Hurricane **Katrina** than to African Americans and other minorities -- particularly blacks with darker skin.

Overall, the "penalty" for being black and a **Katrina** victim amounted to about \$1,000, according to an online study by the Washington Post, washingtonpost.com and Shanto Iyengar, director of the Political Communication Lab at Stanford University.

More than 2,300 individuals participated in the latest experiment, which tested how much subconscious racial bias shapes attitudes toward disaster relief. The participants were skewed heavily toward Democrats and liberals -- only 12 percent identified as Republican. The sample, with many drawn from the Washington metropolitan area, was also highly educated -- 84 percent had at least a bachelor's degree.

Participants went to a Web site that featured a news article about the effect of the hurricane. A photo of an individual featured in the story accompanied the article.

But here's the trick: The race, gender and occupation of the featured person varied. Some participants read an article about a flood victim named Terry Miller who was depicted in the photo as a black man; others read the same item, except the Terry Miller in the photo was a white man, while in others, Terry became a black or a white woman. (The Latino victim was named Terry Medina.) In some photos, the skin tone was darker; in others, it was lighter.

After reading the article, participants were asked how much government aid hurricane victims should get for housing and general living expenses. For each type of assistance, participants could give from \$200 to \$1,200 per month, and from three months to a maximum of 18 months.

If race mattered, there would be a difference in the level of assistance favored by respondents who read an article about the white Terry Miller and the assistance favored by those who read about a black Terry Miller.

There was. People were willing to give assistance to a white victim, on average, for about 12 months. But for an African American victim, the average duration was a month shorter while the amount of aid was nearly the same, meaning that blacks would collect about \$1,000 less than white victims.

Skin tone also mattered. A darker-skinned black person received about

\$100 a month less over a shorter time than a light-skinned white person, all other factors being equal -- a huge effect. Participants also were the least generous after reading an article on looting.

"These results suggest that news media coverage of natural disasters can shape the audience's response," Iyengar said. "Framing the disaster in ways that evoke racial stereotypes can make people less supportive of large-scale relief efforts."

On the Web

A complete analysis of the results of the latest Washington Post-Stanford experiment is available at www.washingtonpost.com/richmorin.