

Children's books are still whiter and more male than US society, says study

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A new paper in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* finds that children's books in the United States continue to underrepresent ethnic minorities. In addition, it finds that male characters are overrepresented in such

stories, and children are often presented with lighter skin tones for no apparent editorial reason.

Education teaches [children](#) about the world, its people, and their place in it. Much of this happens through the books society presents to children in school and at home. These books transmit messages about identity in part by providing examples of what is normal in society and children's places within it. Beginning in the middle of the last century, many educators and parents became concerned about the absence of Black and Brown—in addition to disabled, queer, or even divorced—characters in most children's books and urged writers, publishers, and librarians to remedy this situation.

The researchers here worked to assess the success of these efforts. They developed and applied tools from the fields of computer vision and [natural language](#) processing to measure the representation of skin color, race, gender, and age in the images and text of influential children's books that are likely to appear in classrooms, libraries, and at home over the past century.

These artificial intelligence tools allow for more scalable and systematic measurement than what would be possible using the traditional approach to content analysis, which historically has been done primarily by hand using human coders. The data comprise children's books recognized by awards featured by the Association for Library Service to Children starting in the 1920s.

The paper finds underrepresentation of Black and Latinx people in the most influential books, relative to their population shares, though the representation of Black individuals increases over time. The study finds that in the mainstream collection of children's books published between 1923 and 2019, only 2% of characters pictured were Black (despite constituting 13.6% of the U.S. population) and only 4% were Latinx

(19% of the U.S. population).

The researchers note that there are more [female characters](#) in children's books today than in the past, but they appear less often in text than in images, suggesting greater symbolic inclusion in pictures than substantive inclusion in stories. Children's books also depict children with lighter skin color than adults on average, despite there not being a biological foundation for any systematic difference.

The researchers also note that mainstream books, those that receive recognition for their literary or artistic value without explicit intention to highlight an identity group (i.e., the Newbery and Caldecott awards) are on average slightly cheaper than books that received recognition for highlighting a specific identity group. The mainstream books sold for an average \$7.66. The diversity books cost an average \$9.34.

"The process of education transmits not only the values of society, but also whose space it is," said Anjali Adukia, the paper's lead author. "The optimal level of representation is a philosophical question, but representation can be measured and improved upon based on the goals of the curator in question. Computational tools can increase understanding of the messages being sent in the images and text of the books we give our children, which can then help efforts to systematically address structural inequities."

More information: Anjali Adukia et al, What We Teach about Race and Gender: Representation in Images and Text of Childrens Books, *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/qje/qjad028](https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjad028)

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