

Genetic Data From Over 20,000 U.S. Children Misused for ‘Race Science’

The National Institutes of Health failed to protect brain scans that an international group of fringe researchers used to argue for the intellectual superiority of white people.

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By Mike McIntire

Jan. 24, 2026

Genetic researchers were seeking children for an ambitious, federally funded project to track brain development — a study that they told families could yield invaluable discoveries about DNA’s impact on behavior and disease.

They also promised that the children’s sensitive data would be closely guarded in the decade-long study, which got underway in 2015. Promotional materials included a cartoon of a Black child saying it felt good knowing that “scientists are taking steps to keep my information safe.”

The scientists did not keep it safe.

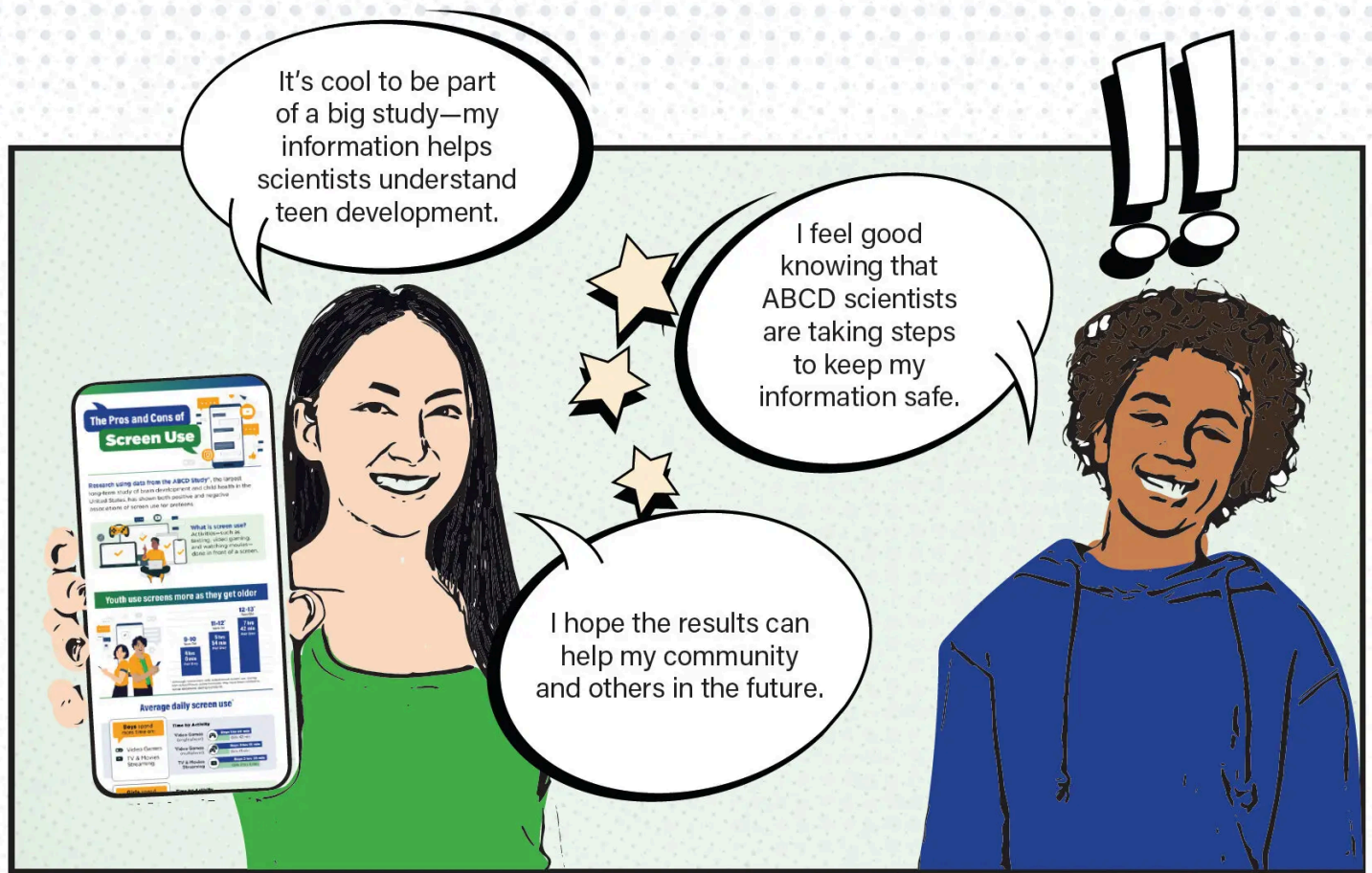
A group of fringe researchers thwarted safeguards at the National Institutes of Health and gained access to data from thousands of children. The researchers have used it to produce at least 16 papers purporting to find biological evidence for differences in intelligence between races, ranking ethnicities by I.Q. scores and suggesting Black people earn less because they are not very smart.

Mainstream geneticists have rejected their work as biased and unscientific. Yet by relying on genetic and other personal data from the prominent project, known as the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study, the researchers gave their theories an air of analytical rigor.

Members of the research group were ineligible to obtain data from the ABCD project. But one of them gained access through an American professor who was already being investigated by the N.I.H. over his handling of another child brain study.

Their papers have provided fodder for racist posts on social media and white nationalist message boards that have been viewed millions of times. Some of the papers are cited by A.I. bots like ChatGPT and Grok in response to queries about race and intelligence. On the social media platform X, Grok has referred users to the research more than two dozen times this month alone.

“It’s evil,” said Dr. Terry L. Jernigan, national co-director of the ABCD Study and a neuropsychologist at the University of California, San Diego. “It’s not just that the science is faulty, but it’s being used to advance an unethical agenda.”



A cartoon promoting the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study. Department of Health & Human Services

The misuse of the children’s data has validated longstanding concerns that hundreds of thousands of Americans’ genetic information held by the N.I.H. could fall into the wrong hands. The agency grants widespread access to stimulate new medical

discoveries. But critics say the N.I.H. has failed to address the risks that the data, even with personally identifiable details removed, could be misused in unethical research, for commercial purposes or by foreign adversaries.

At least 63 times since 2007, data from some of the 28 human genomic repositories that the N.I.H. controls was improperly released to researchers, used for unapproved purposes or made vulnerable to theft, according to government records reviewed by The New York Times. In dozens of cases, the N.I.H. suspended researchers' access and demanded that compromised data be destroyed, but the agency relies heavily on good-faith pledges of compliance.

The misuse of the data for so-called race science is not the only example of a security failure involving the ABCD Study.

The Times learned that in 2024, the same data was improperly obtained by an unidentified researcher in China. The data is not allowed to be shared with people in adversarial countries that could use it for blackmail, spy recruitment or military purposes. But the researcher evaded that prohibition by faking an affiliation with an American university, according to a former N.I.H. official and Dr. Jernigan, who said the agency informed her of the incident.

There has been no official public accounting of how the N.I.H. lost control of the children's genetic information. The Chronicle of Higher Education in 2022 reported on the mishandling of data from another child brain study by the same American professor, Bryan J. Pesta, who also obtained the ABCD information. But details about the subsequent loss and abuse of the ABCD data have not been previously reported.

Today, the data continues to be twisted to advance an ideological agenda.

When Elon Musk invited X users last June to post politically incorrect “divisive facts” on the social network, one of Dr. Pesta's collaborators — Jordan Lasker, who often writes about race and intelligence under the name Crémieux — replied with a criticism of affirmative action and said white people had bigger brains than Black people. The post, viewed 670,000 times, included a chart that purported to support his claim about brain size and cited the ABCD Study as its data source.



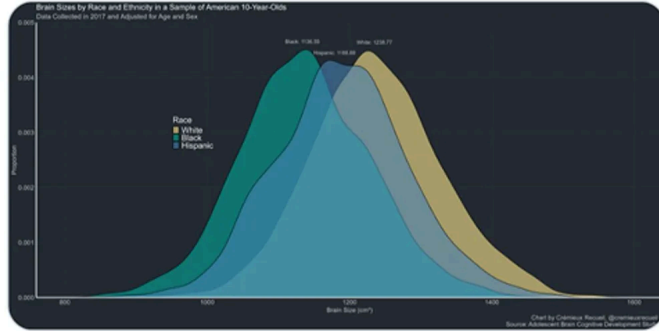
Crémieux

@cremieuxrecueil

America's race differences in brain sizes and IQs are as large today as in the 19th century.

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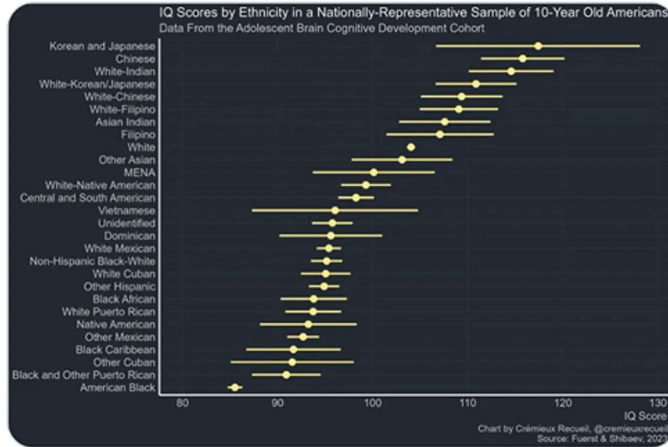
The conservative commentator Dinesh D’Souza said on X in 2023 that studies showed that Black people, “who are the rock-solid base of the Democratic Party, have the lowest IQ of any ethnic group.” As evidence, he reposted another chart by Mr. Lasker based on ABCD data about American 10-year-olds.



Dinesh D'Souza

@DineshDSouza

Here's a summary of a recent study. I'm not endorsing it, merely sharing the results. You can find many others that show a similar pattern. Interestingly there are no studies that show the opposite result: blacks on top, whites in the middle and Asians on the bottom



3:56 PM · May 29, 2023 · 334.4K Views

Scientists said the unauthorized use of the data underscored the need for stronger controls. Several families in the ABCD Study said in interviews that they were not told about the misuse of the information and never would have agreed to participate had they known it could be used to promote racial division.

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Kevin Bird, a geneticist who complained to the N.I.H. about Dr. Pesta, said the data was made vulnerable because “our scientific institutions sort of assume good faith in people.”

“There needs to be an acknowledgment that there are bad-faith researchers,” he said. “The rules and regulations need to catch up with that.”

In a statement, Lyric Jorgenson, associate director of science policy at the N.I.H., said the agency had taken steps to protect the ABCD Study. It has introduced a new online portal requiring users to complete training on responsible data use and to “pass a knowledge test prior to accessing the data.”

In response to the fraudulent access by a Chinese researcher, she said, the N.I.H. “made enhancements that will prevent this type of incident” from happening again.

“N.I.H. has a longstanding commitment to make the results of N.I.H.-funded research available,” she said, noting that it has approved more than 92,000 access requests since 2007. “At the same time, N.I.H. takes the protection of all human data very seriously and has numerous safeguards in place.”

But the Government Accountability Office, a federal watchdog, reported last April that the N.I.H. did not have the resources to properly monitor all the downloads of genetic data and “may be missing violations that go unreported by researchers.”

‘A Sneaky Way’

The data that Dr. Pesta obtained came from two studies. In the nationwide ABCD Study, more than 11,000 children underwent regular M.R.I.s and clinical tests and had DNA samples taken from their blood or saliva. In a separate study, known as the Philadelphia Neurodevelopmental Cohort, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania collected similar information from about 9,500 children.

Data from the projects has generated hundreds of papers on, among other things, the effects of social media on mental health, genetic links to addiction and the causes of sleep disorders.

The data is maintained by the N.I.H. To gain access, researchers must be tenure-track professors or senior scientists with authorization from their institutions. They also must detail what they plan to do with the information. The N.I.H. can reject proposals that fall outside its guidelines.

The agency discourages “stigmatizing research” that could promote “negative stereotypes” or cause “social detriment.” That is, in part, a nod to eugenics, a discredited field of research asserting that certain races, usually white Europeans, are genetically superior. Such ideas — and the pseudoscientific

studies that support them — have been used to justify violence, including by the gunman who killed 10 Black people at a supermarket in Buffalo in 2022.

In April 2018, Dr. Pesta, who at the time was a management professor at Cleveland State University, submitted a proposal to the N.I.H. He said he was researching differences in brain size and cognitive abilities in men and women and wanted access to data from the Philadelphia study.



At least 63 times since 2007, data controlled by the National Institutes of Health was improperly released to researchers, used for unapproved purposes or made vulnerable to theft. Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

Emails unearthed in a lawsuit that Dr. Pesta later brought against the university show that he had been working with a group of race researchers who coached him on how to apply for access. One of them was John G.R. Fuerst, a graduate student from North Carolina. In a March 2018 email, he told Dr. Pesta that focusing on gender differences would be “a sneaky way” to get the data to also study disparities in intelligence between races — a topic the group believed the N.I.H. would not greenlight.

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Though Dr. Pesta later submitted updates on further research he wanted to do, none explicitly described the group’s true intentions, according to court records. The legal filings also show that another group member, Emil O.W. Kirkegaard, a right-wing blogger in Denmark, suggested Dr. Pesta submit misleading proposals to gain access to additional data sets.

“I reckon that if we mask the nature of the study with usual medical terms, one can ‘get away with’ a lot,” Mr. Kirkegaard wrote in an email. “Getting samples for analyses that one doesn’t publish (to preserve your reputation!) are still useful because they allow us to validate our beliefs privately.”

In an interview, Dr. Pesta denied misleading the N.I.H. and defended his work. “I am not a eugenicist,” he said.

Dr. Pesta’s collaborators had a history of scrounging for data to support their fringe theories and of using unreliable methodologies.

“IQ scores by ethnic group in a nationally-representative sample of 10-year old American children” by John G.R. Fuerst, writing as “Chuck” on HumanVarieties.org, May 2023

In a 2023 paper, Mr. Fuerst tried to rank the intelligence of children across ethnic groups. But **the sample size for the vast majority of groups was far too small to draw meaningful conclusions.**

ETHNIC/NATIONAL GROUP

Black African	59
Asian Indian	53
Other Asian	52
Black Caribbean	51
Filipino	51
N. Africa & Mid. East	47
White & Asian Indian	44
Native American	39
Dominican	38

Korean & Japanese	33
Other Cuban	30
White & Pacific Islander	25
Vietnamese	24
Pacific Islander	17

The paper also **invented a category, “USA Black,”** excluding Black children with Hispanic or white heritage and an immigrant parent or grandparent. Furthermore, the race of participants was **self-reported, a potentially inconsistent gauge of ancestry.**

ETHNIC/NATIONAL GROUP	DEFINITION
Pacific Islander	not Hispanic & not White & Pacific Islander
USA Black	not Hispanic & not White & Black & non-immigrant family
Vietnamese	not Hispanic & not White & Vietnamese

Mr. Kirkegaard has published dozens of pieces in *Mankind Quarterly*, a journal known for pushing race science. He has studied penis sizes by race and once looked for correlations between intelligence and first names, concluding that people with “non-western Muslim names” had lower I.Q.s. Authorities in Britain blocked Mr. Kirkegaard and his European colleagues from the country’s repository of genetic data because they were “not bona fide researchers,” *The Guardian* reported in 2024.

Another member of Dr. Pesta's group was Mr. Lasker, whose frequent posts online mix data analysis with ideological barbs. He dismissed Supreme Court Justices Ketanji Brown Jackson and Sonia Sotomayor as "clearly incompetent" affirmative-action hires. (During the campaign for New York City mayor, Mr. Lasker also shared hacked data with The Times showing that Zohran Mamdani had identified as "Black or African American" on a college application.)

To finance their research, Dr. Pesta and Mr. Fuerst, the North Carolina graduate student, set up a foundation that received tens of thousands of dollars from the Pioneer Fund, which has a history of promoting eugenics-related research and race science. The fund's president at the time once wrote approvingly about the idea of "phasing out" incompetent cultures by withholding foreign aid and banning migrants "of low genetic quality."

The N.I.H. approved Dr. Pesta's access to the Philadelphia data, which he and Mr. Fuerst analyzed on a computer in Dr. Pesta's home, according to a transcript of his interview with university investigators. Dr. Pesta also told them that he had uploaded the data, without N.I.H. approval, to a foreign DNA lab to try to determine the skin color of children in the study.

In August 2019, Dr. Pesta, Mr. Fuerst, Mr. Kirkegaard and Mr. Lasker produced an analysis of the Philadelphia data. Their paper — which appeared in *Psych*, an online journal that Dr. Pesta edited

— had nothing to do with gender differences and brain size, the topic for which Dr. Pesta had initially obtained the data. Instead, it declared that among people of mixed race, those with greater European ancestry were more intelligent, and that genes were probably the reason.

“These results provide support for a hereditarian model,” they wrote.

‘Playacting’ at Science

The “hereditarian model” is the belief that intelligence is largely inherited and not a result of environmental factors. Race science broadens the theory across ancestral groups, asserting that people with a European background tend to perform better than African Americans on I.Q. tests because they are innately smarter, a view embraced by white supremacists.

This runs counter to the scientific consensus that any correlation between a complex trait like intelligence and genes, let alone social constructs like race, is not the same as causation.

Research has found that the environment in which people are raised can affect their cognitive abilities. In the United States, for example, any serious analysis must consider how Black people

endured centuries of slavery and racial discrimination and how they today face disproportionately high poverty rates and a lack of quality education and health care.

But Dr. Pesta and his colleagues did not focus on that.

“Global Ancestry and Cognitive Ability” by Jordan Lasker, Bryan J. Pesta, John G.R. Fuerst and Emil O.W. Kirkegaard, published in Pysch, Aug. 30, 2019

The authors of this paper admitted that **the only socioeconomic information available in the Philadelphia data was the education levels of the children’s parents.** Their study didn't consider factors like family income and employment that can affect racial I.Q. gaps.

2.2. Parental Socioeconomic Status

Only paternal and maternal education were available to us as measures of SES. We coded parental education as the average of each, both z-scored first. When data were only available from one parent this value was used. The final score was then z-scored again.

The Philadelphia data did not include information on skin, eye or hair color of the children, so Dr. Pesta tried to predict those traits by **uploading the genetic data to an unapproved, foreign DNA lab — contributing to sanctions against him from the N.I.H.**

2.5. Skin, Hair, and Eye Color

The data did not include measures of appearance, so we opted to impute these based on genotypes. We used the HIrisPlex-S web application to do this. This application was developed by the U.S. Department of Justice for use in forensic investigations. It imputes skin, hair, and eye color probabilities with a high degree of accuracy based on 41 SNPs (with overlapping variants; 6 for eye color, 22 for hair color, and 36 for skin color).

Dr. Pesta said in the interview that his research was scientifically sound and intended to improve the lives of Black people by determining the cause of I.Q. gaps. Because “I.Q. test scores strongly predict human well-being, and African Americans are on the short end of every well-being stick, I think it’s an important problem,” he said.

Mr. Fuerst, Mr. Kirkegaard and Mr. Lasker did not respond to requests for comment.

Their 2019 paper caused a commotion, with scientists criticizing it for discounting possible nongenetic explanations for the I.Q. gap. Alexander Gusev, a geneticist at Harvard University who has written about the “weaponization of genomic data,” said such an approach was “playacting at doing science.”

“The goal seems to be just to dig through the data and find something that matches a hypothesis about some difference in African Americans versus whites, and then report it without seriously considering any possible caveats,” he said.

Dr. Hakon Hakonarson, a geneticist at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, was the co-leader of the study whose data Dr. Pesta used. When the N.I.H. informed him of Dr. Pesta’s paper, Dr. Hakonarson was outraged, saying its conclusions were not supported by the underlying data.

“It’s most unfortunate that the data you submit in good faith gets abused in this sort of way,” Dr. Hakonarson said.

In September 2019, a month after the paper’s publication, the N.I.H. ordered Dr. Pesta to “immediately cease all work” with the Philadelphia data and began an investigation into his use of it. But about a year later, while the agency was still investigating, it approved Dr. Pesta’s request for the ABCD data. (The N.I.H. did not respond to a question about why.)

In 2021, before Dr. Pesta published anything based on the ABCD Study, the N.I.H. accused him of misconduct with the Philadelphia data and suspended his access to its repositories for three years. It was the most severe penalty the agency had ever issued. Cleveland State fired him the following year.

Dr. Pesta told university investigators that he had destroyed the data as instructed by the N.I.H., but he could not say for certain whether Mr. Fuerst had made a copy from the computer in Dr. Pesta's home. He said he had distanced himself from Mr. Fuerst, who had "gone a little bit rogue."

Mr. Fuerst and his colleagues have continued to cite the ABCD data. In 2024, for example, they published a book that compiled many of their papers and mentioned the ABCD Study about 200 times. Mr. Fuerst's co-authors have included other people ineligible to access the data, such as a professor at a state university in Russia and a freelance researcher in China who has publicly acknowledged having "no formal credentials" in intelligence research.

The papers provide fuel for more forays into race science. Invoking their own previous analyses of the child brain studies, Dr. Pesta, Mr. Kirkegaard and Mr. Fuerst have produced new papers suggesting that Black people earn less than white people because they are less intelligent.

One of those papers, in turn, was cited in a Substack article last April asserting that Black people's supposed lack of intelligence was the source of the racial income gap. The article was picked up by an online magazine with tens of thousands of viewers.

Another paper, coauthored by Mr. Kirkegaard, was limited by what he acknowledged were small sample sizes and a lack of nongenetic data. Those shortcomings did not stop him from trumpeting the findings online as proof that “genetic ancestry, not social race, explains observed gaps in social status.”

Surprise and Dismay

The scientists leading the ABCD Study decided not to tell participants that their data had been misused for race research.

Parents and their children — who are now adults nearing the end of the decade-long study — reacted with surprise and dismay when The Times told them what had happened. They said they deserved to learn about it from the study’s organizers.

Scientists said they chose not to inform the families because they believed doing so could cause more harm than good.

“We have struggled with the decision,” said Angela Laird at Florida International University, who helps run the ABCD Study in South Florida.

Many of her study participants are Black and Hispanic and “are really the targets of these racist studies,” Dr. Laird said. “I do believe that if we sat our families down and read them the studies, they would be upset — and in many cases, that is likely an understatement.”

The organizers of the Philadelphia study didn't tell families, either. Dr. Hakonarson said that because children's identities weren't disclosed, informing parents "was not something that was felt to be needed."

While some scientists have pushed the N.I.H. to limit how sensitive genetic data can be used in research, there is little indication the Trump administration agrees — and there are signs it is moving in the opposite direction.

Adam Candeub, the top lawyer at the Federal Communications Commission, wrote a law review article in 2024 criticizing the N.I.H.'s discouragement of stigmatizing research. He compared it to the persecution of Galileo.

"A liberal society should support the search for truth," Mr. Candeub wrote, "regardless of how uncomfortable and unsettling that truth turns out to be."

Dr. Pesta has claimed that he faced such persecution. He sued Cleveland State for wrongful termination, saying he was a victim of cancel culture. A federal judge dismissed his lawsuit. He ruled that Dr. Pesta was fired "because of his own misconduct" with the restricted data, not the content of his research. A federal appeals court affirmed the decision in November.

Still, Dr. Pesta and his fellow race researchers have reason for optimism. The pendulum of public policy, Dr. Pesta said, “is swinging in terms of acceptance of even asking the questions.”

A few days after President Trump won the 2024 election, Mr. Kirkegaard happily noted on his website that incoming Vice President JD Vance followed compatriots like Mr. Lasker on social media. His post featured an image of a red “Make Science Great Again” hat.

Within weeks of Mr. Trump taking office, the N.I.H. made a little-noticed revision to the guidelines on access to a large genetic database. Its description of what constituted stigmatizing research no longer included any reference to skin color, ancestry and ethnicity.

Produced by Tina Zhou and Rumsey Taylor.

Mike McIntire, an investigative reporter, has been with The Times since 2003.

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