



New research finds CIA used black Americans as drugs experiment guinea pigs

Description

By now, many will be familiar with Project [MKULTRA](#). For decades, the CIA conducted highly unethical experiments on humans in order to perfect brainwashing, mind control and torture techniques.

Perhaps the program's most notorious aspect was the administration of high doses of psychoactive drugs to targets, particularly LSD. These substances were brought to Langley's attention in 1948 by Richard Kuhn, one of 1,600 Nazi scientists covertly spirited to the U.S. via Operation Paperclip following World War II. When MKULTRA was formally established five years later, some individuals consulted directly on the project.

The unwitting dosing of U.S. citizens with LSD is infamous; among those spiked were CIA operatives themselves. That the Agency exploited mental patients, prisoners, and drug addicts for the purpose – “people who could not fight back,” in the words of an unnamed Agency operative – is less well-known.

[A study](#) by academics at the University of Ottawa's Culture and Mental Health Disparities Lab sheds significant new light on this underexplored component of MKULTRA and illuminates a hitherto wholly unknown dimension of the program; people of color, overwhelmingly Black Americans, were disproportionately targeted by the CIA in its service.

SPOKEN OF AS ANIMALS AND TREATED AS SUCH

[In 1973](#), due to fears CIA covert action might be officially audited in the wake of the Watergate scandal, then-Agency chief Richard Helms ordered all papers related to MKULTRA destroyed.

Tens of thousands of documents somehow survived the purge. Even more conveniently, a significant portion of the research yielded by the project's experiments was published in freely-accessible, peer-reviewed scientific journals, as over 80 private and public universities, prisons, and hospitals – whether knowingly or not – conducted psychedelic drug experiments on behalf of the CIA. While LSD was the preponderant substance of interest, the effects of DMT, mescaline, psilocybin, and THC were also

extensively explored.

In all, the University of Ottawa team analyzed 49 of these papers, published from the 1950s to the 1970s. Forty percent related to experiments conducted at the Addiction Research Center in Kentucky, which the CIA directly managed.

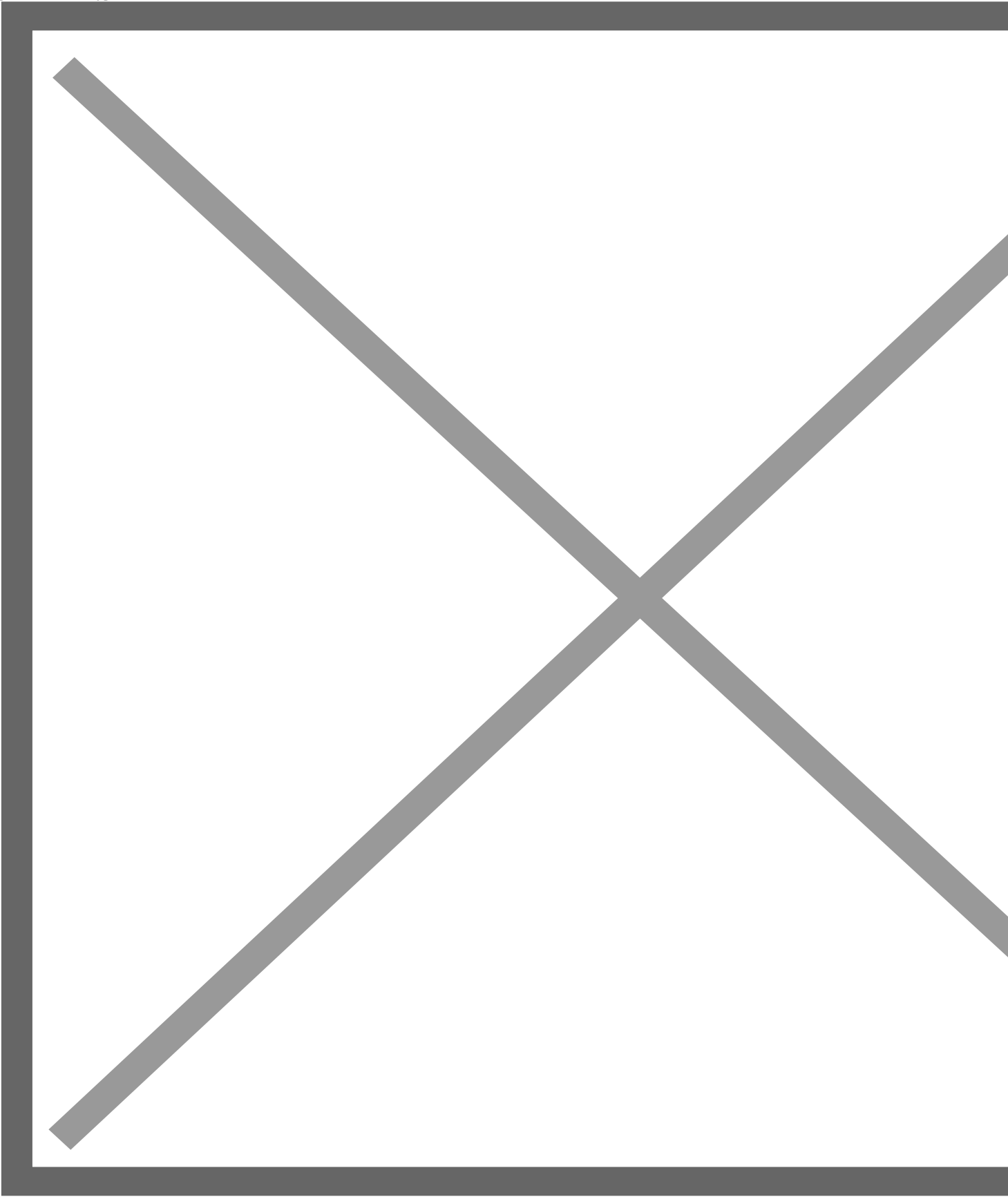
The site included a prison for individuals charged with violating narcotics laws, a “special ward” for drug research, and a prison populated by purported “addicts.” Researchers employed there avowedly preferred to perform tests on former and current drug users, as they were considered to be “experienced” in the effects of illicit substances and therefore better able to give informed consent than the abstinent. In practice, the CIA’s guinea pigs frequently had no idea what was being administered.

In analyzing available literature, the academics examined participants’ stated race and ethnicity, recruitment strategies, methodology, and potential dangers to participants. All studies used captured, incarcerated test subjects, coercive incentives for participation, unsafe dosing levels, and had questionable scientific merit.

In almost 90% of cases, at least one ethical violation was identified, over three-quarters employed a high-risk dosing schedule that would be unacceptable under modern guidelines, and 15% used participants with psychotic disorders. Roughly 30% exploited people of color.

While in many studies, the race or ethnicity of test subjects was not recorded, further investigation by the Ottawa academics revealed Black Americans were significantly overrepresented in the recruitment sites from which test subjects were drawn. It is inevitable that the actual number of MKULTRA studies that abused people of color is far larger. For example, while people of color constituted just 7% of Kentucky’s population at the time of experiments at the Addiction Research Center, Black and Mexican Americans represented 66% of the site’s inmate population.

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Culture and Mental Health Disparities Lab | University of Ottawa

In any event, that people of color suffered to a far greater degree than White test subjects at the proverbial hands of the CIA is starkly set forth in the experiments' bloodcurdling details. For instance, a 1957 study records how numerous vulnerable individuals were psychologically and physically tortured, in particular one Black participant, who was described by researchers as if he were an animal and treated accordingly.

Dosed with LSD, he exhibited a "wild frightened look" and asked for "medicines to relieve his fear." Their response was to place him in restraints and administer a further cocktail of drugs at far higher doses than other participants – whose race was not recorded – and to continue doing so against his will.

Similarly, the previous year, an experiment was conducted in which Black participants were given 180 micrograms of LSD each day for 85 days, while White participants received 75 micrograms each day over just eight days. One Black subject had a "very severe" reaction to their dosage and asked to drop out of the study once they had recovered. After "considerable persuasion," however, they agreed to continue.

Undue influence was a recurrent theme identified by the academics across the papers analyzed. A variety of coercive techniques were frequently employed to solicit and maintain participation in brutal and, at times, life-threatening examinations.

For example, Addiction Research Center inmates were offered a choice of reduced sentences, or drugs such as heroin, in return for volunteering. These drugs could be taken upon completion of a study or saved in a "bank account" for subsequent "withdrawals." Test subjects almost always chose to feed their addictions rather than get out of prison earlier.

'DR. X, THIS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS....'

The settings in which participants were experimented upon also differed wildly according to race – even in the same study. One in 1960 observed side-by-side the effects of LSD on a group of "Negro" men convicted of drug charges, who were dosed in a prison research ward, and another comprised of professional White Americans, who freely volunteered and received their doses in the cozy confines of the principal investigator's home, "under social conditions designed to reduce anxiety."

Such cases give the appearance of having been expressly conducted to gauge potentially varying reactions to psychedelic drugs in Black and White participants, which raises the obvious question of whether the CIA had a specific – or indeed greater – interest in the effect of certain drugs on people of color, rather than the civilian population in general.

MK Ultra

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A volunteer undergoes LSD research project at an honor camp in Viejas, California, Sept. 6, 1966.
Photo | AP

Dana Strauss, who led the Ottawa University investigation, argues that the disproportionate representation of Black Americans in MKULTRA experiments, while intensely racially charged, was simply a reflection the ethnic compositions of the institutions targeted by the CIA – although she’s certain that if the Agency’s researchers did not have a readily available prison population at their disposal, they would still have opted to targeted people of color, in the manner of the [Tuskegee syphilis study](#).

As Strauss explained to *MintPress*:

Prisons were already filled with Black bodies. They could have experimented on free individuals, but they would not have been able to get away with these kinds of experiments. There were no protections at this time for vulnerable populations such as incarcerated research participants, so the researchers could basically do what they wanted... These people were targeted for these dangerous studies specifically because they were Black and prisoners and therefore less valued.”

Just as the closed environments of Nazi concentration camps permitted monsters like Josef Mengele to conduct callous, horrific experiments on humans with no regard for health or safety, so too did incarcerated and/or institutionalized people of color afford the CIA an endless supply of test subjects “who could not fight back,” to be exploited and violated however Langley wished, without scrutiny or consequence.

In the process, Strauss says, researchers tested human responses to psychedelic drugs to the absolute limit. Yet while MKULTRA researchers did not quite match the evil and barbarity unleashed in Auschwitz, at least as far as we know, a comparable contempt for test subjects is evident in several studies. Such disregard may account for the wanton and excessive nature of certain experiments, which served no clear purpose and the scientific value of which was far from clear.

In 1955, a team of researchers conducted a study on four schizophrenic patients at Spring Grove State Hospital, in Baltimore, Maryland, a now majority Black city. The test subjects were given enormous amounts of LSD over an extended period – 100 micrograms per day for two weeks, which was increased by a further 100 micrograms daily thereafter to combat rising tolerance levels. For comparison, current psychedelic [research guidelines](#) mandate a 200 microgram dose of LSD as an absolute maximum per day, and warn against extended dosing periods.

All along, the researchers monitored participants without compassion, disrespecting and dehumanizing them. Objectifying language in their resultant report reflected this depraved outlook. Their perverse voyeurism extended to observing “toilet habits” and “eroticism”, and reporting on how often the four “soiled themselves” and “smeared feces”. They also noted how often the patients “masturbated or talked about sex,” and even recorded how one patient protested desperately about their mistreatment: “Dr. X, this is serious business...we are pathetic people... don’t play with us.”

“GLARING RESEARCH INJUSTICES”

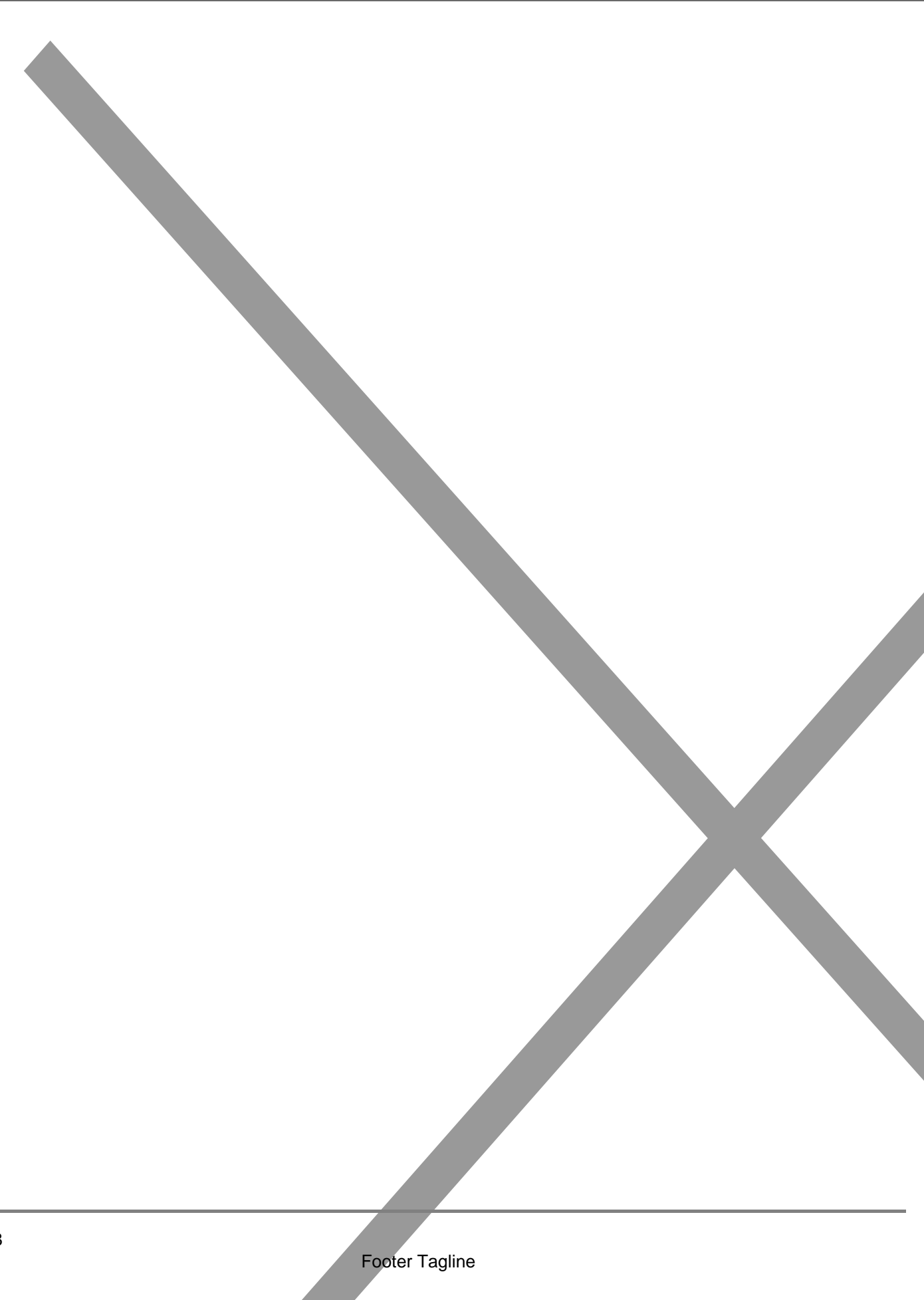
For Strauss, that MKULTRA's racial component remained unacknowledged and hidden in plain sight so long "speaks to where we are as a society."

Just as CIA researchers devalued the lives of Black Americans and prison inmates, so to have academics ever since, even if unconsciously. Contemporarily, Strauss notes, scholars remain intensely uninterested in how non-White individuals respond to mental health treatments. She points to a recent study that found over 80% of participants in modern psychedelic research studies are non-Hispanic White.

"Psychedelic research, psychology and academia as a whole are still White-dominated fields. In 2015, over 85% of psychologists in the U.S. were White, and less than 5% were Black. A Black psychologist, Dr. Monnica Williams, was the first to investigate the research abuses and ethical violations in MKULTRA," Strauss tells *MintPress*. "I think the real question is, why didn't anybody else investigate these glaring research injustices?"

Even more shockingly, while the morality of scientists and medical professionals using inhumane and illegal Nazi research continues to be hotly debated, no such concerns are apparent in respect of the highly unethical and fundamentally racist MKULTRA studies examined by Strauss and her team; they continue to be cited as legitimate academic work today.

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Chemist Cecil Hider displays a sample of LSD during testimony in March 1966 about the control of hallucinogenic drugs. Walter Zeboski | AP

Strauss hopes their [paper](#) will trigger a wider debate about the ways in which research abuses have impacted and continue to impact people of color and how mental health research can become more socially responsible and culturally competent.

More generally, there is clearly a pressing need for an official MKULTRA truth and reconciliation committee. No CIA official or participating academic was ever held accountable or punished in any way for any of the countless crimes against humanity committed under its auspices, and the Project's full extent remains opaque and mysterious. All the time, though, in spite of ongoing obfuscation, we learn ever more about the sinister secret program, including its overseas component, MKDELTA.

In December 2021, it was revealed that for decades, the CIA had conducted invasive experiments on Danish children, many of them orphans, without their informed consent. When one of the victims attempted to access locally-held documents on the macabre connivance, authorities began shredding the papers. Questions abound as to where else in Europe the Agency may have undertaken similar efforts.

Evidently, the coverup continues – suppression surely not only motivated by a reflexive desire to conceal historic crimes, but because such records may well have relevance to CIA activities in the present.

As *MintPress* revealed in April, many of the techniques of torture and mental manipulation honed by the Agency over the course of MKULTRA's official existence were employed to devastating effect on the inmates of Guantanamo Bay. There is no reason to believe they aren't still in use elsewhere now or won't be in the future.

Richard Helms' fears of congressional probes into MKULTRA eventually came to pass [in 1977](#). Among those who testified was Edward M. Flowers, the only surviving prisoner participant of CIA mind control experiments to have been located. Flowers took part in psychedelic tests at the Addiction Research Center in the 1950s while incarcerated. While the hearings granted him a new, disquieting understanding of what had been done to him in the name of science, nothing came of it.

"I really got a first-hand insight about some things when we had the hearings...I got in touch with the fact that the CIA was behind all this...They used my ass and took advantage of me," [he recalled many years later](#). "I went back up on The Hill a second time. I sat down with a couple of people, and they talked about some things that had to do with compensation...and that was the last I heard of it."

By contrast, [in November 1996](#), as the furor over allegations the CIA had facilitated the sale of crack cocaine in California in order to finance covert operations in Nicaragua reached a crescendo, then-Agency chief John Deutch was compelled to field difficult questions from residents of Los Angeles about the reported conspiracy at an unprecedented face-to-face meeting.

There is no reason that public outcry over the Ottawa University study's findings could not again pressure Langley representatives to explain themselves in public. And every reason that it should.

by Jonas E. Alexis

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