



Subcultures of violence and African American crime rates

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ABSTRACT

A re-examination of the relationship between socioeconomic adversities and crime, especially when focused on violent crime by African Americans over long time periods, suggests that the prevailing reliance on purely structural analysis is insufficient and that analysis relying in part on cultural factors will be advantageous in explaining elevated or relatively low violent crime rates of particular social groups.

1. Introduction

From the late 1960s to the mid-1990s, the United States suffered a massive crime wave, including perhaps the biggest sustained rise in violent crime in its history, certainly the biggest in the 20th century (Latzer, 2016). Violent crime rates, as measured by FBI reports of offenses known to police, rose from 161 per 100,000 in 1960 to 758 in 1991, a staggering 371% escalation. Murder rates for 1970 to 1995 averaged 8.97 per 100,000, and in fourteen of these years tolled 9 per 100,000 or more (FBI, UCR Data Online). An estimated 540,019 Americans were murdered in this twenty-five year period, more than the number that perished in all U.S. foreign wars from World War II to Afghanistan combined (DeBruyne & Leland, 2015).

Criminologists have frequently addressed the reasons for the post-1995 crime decline (Blumstein & Wallman, 2000; Karmen, 2000; Levitt, 2004; Zimring, 2007, 2012), but they have been surprisingly reticent about analyzing the crime rise (but see, LaFree, 1998; Latzer, 2016). This is odd because one might expect criminology, of all disciplines, to provide insights into crime phenomena as momentous as multi-decade booms and troughs. Partly because of its concern with contemporary crime, however, the discipline tends to focus on very short timeframes, such as one year, and seldom examines historical crime effects.

One disadvantage of this approach is that the theories and analyses used to examine contemporary crime issues are not adequately tested. They may undervalue important correlates of the past and overweight factors of little or no significance in earlier periods. One reason, then, to look back at historical developments is to test and refine these analytical tools. To the extent that criminology aspires to develop and apply invariant factors – factors that always affect crime regardless of historical conditions – it will be useful to reexamine the past.

The role of African Americans in the post-60s crime boom illustrates one of the problems with failing to examine historical crime. The Great Migration of blacks from the South to northern and west coast cities during and after World War II had a major impact on the post-60s crime situation (Latzer, 2016, pp. 106, 128–41). As Roland Chilton's (1995) study of urban homicide demonstrated, between 1960 and 1990, murder arrests of African Americans, approximately 12% of the U.S. population, accounted for an astonishing 65 to 78% of all big city homicide arrests in the nation. Furthermore, between 1965 and 1990, arrest rates of blacks for crimes of violence, including but not limited to murder, were five to nine times the white rates (FBI, 1993, p. 173).

The intellectual climate of the 1960s, shared by criminologists and other social scientists, fixated on poverty and related adverse conditions. Little attention was paid to the economic progress of African Americans, which was considerable. Criminologists at the time and ever since have focused on the nexus between crime and socioeconomic adversities, such as poverty, residential segregation, female-headed households, high unemployment rates, and socially-isolated large-scale communities. Analysts commonly explained, and continue to explain, the exceptionally high crime rates of low-income urban African Americans in terms of these conditions (e.g., Lo, Howell, & Cheng, 2013; Sampson, 1987).

However, a comparison of black conditions and crime rates at the time of the crime rise with conditions and crime rates of earlier periods produces anomalies. In earlier periods the conditions often were worse while the crime rates were lower. And in the late 1960s, when African American conditions had improved markedly, their crime rates began to escalate dramatically. This is especially noticeable when we compare black conditions and crime in 1940, on the eve of the World War II migration, and in 1970, at the start of the crime tsunami.

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Table 1
African American socioeconomic conditions, 1940 vs. 1970.

	1940	1970
Yearly income, black males	\$4531	\$16,527
Black wages as % of white	43.3%	64.4%
Black males middle class or above	24%	76%
Avg years of schooling, black males, ages 16–64	4.7 years	9.47 years
% of poor blacks, family income	75%	30%
Family income as % of white	41.1%	61.2%
% blacks unemployed	9.7%	3.9%
% blacks in owner-occupied housing	23%	42%

Smith & Welch, 1986, tables 1, 2, 4, 10, 44, 45; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1979, tables 41, 96.

In 1940 black homicide victimization rates were 54.4 per 100,000, whereas in 1970 they were 78.2 per 100,000, a difference of 44% (Latzer, 2016, p. 29). Yet by almost every measure African Americans socioeconomic conditions were better in 1970 than in 1940. “Blacks not only shared in the rising prosperity of the war and the immediate postwar years,” wrote historians Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997), p. 70, “they advanced more rapidly than whites.” Table 1 gives a snapshot of black socioeconomic progress in the three decades ending in 1970.

In keeping with the concerns of the period the federal government launched a “war on poverty” in the late 1960s, aimed in large measure at ameliorating urban black economic problems (Patterson, 2000). Whether the poverty war was effective is debatable, but it shows both the national determination to improve black conditions and the optimism of policymakers and intellectuals that this could be achieved. In addition to economic betterment, blacks saw dramatic (and long overdue) reductions in white racism as evidenced by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the former described as “far and away the most important [legislation] in the history of race relations” (Patterson, 1996, p. 546).

Despite these economic and social advances black crime began to escalate markedly in the late 1960s and continued to play a major role in the multi-decade crime boom that followed (Latzer, 2016, pp. 128–45, 164–70). The unexplained juxtaposition of improving black conditions and escalating black offending raises significant questions about the relationship between structural conditions and crime.

If structural factors alone accounted for black crime rates we would expect that the rates would have been lower in 1970 than 1940. That they were not suggests that other factors must have been at work. In addition to the unexpected mismatch between adversity and crime for a single group, structural variables are not always predictive of violent crime rates across subcultural groups. As discussed below, some groups may suffer more disadvantages than other groups but engage in less crime; and the obverse also is true.

A principal aim of this paper is to reexamine the relationship between socioeconomic adversities and crime. It will suggest that the regnant structural analysis is insufficient to explain violent crime and that analyses relying in part on cultural factors will be helpful in explaining the elevated violent crime rates of certain social groups.

Criminologists are starting to question the assumption that structural variables alone satisfactorily explain exceptionally high crime rates among low-income groups. Recently, Feldmeyer, Steffensmeier, and Ulmer (2013, p. 838) stated that “it may be beneficial to move beyond “structure only” perspectives and shift toward approaches that can account for the intersecting influences of both structural conditions as well as variations in culture and norms shaping race/ethnicity effects on crime.”

This cautious assertion marks a positive development within the discipline for the reasons explored in detail below.

Table 2
Percentage of population (all persons) below poverty.

	Black	White	Hispanic
2014	26.2	10.1	23.6
2013	26.2	9.8	24.1
2012	27.2	9.7	25.6
2011	27.6	9.8	25.3
2010	27.4	9.9	26.5
2009	25.8	9.4	25.3
2008	24.7	8.6	23.2
2007	24.5	8.2	21.5
2006	24.3	8.2	20.6
2005	24.9	8.3	21.8
2004	24.7	8.7	21.9
2003	24.4	8.2	22.5
2002	24.1	8	21.8
2001	22.7	7.8	21.4
2000	22.5	7.4	21.5
Mean:	25.2	8.8	23.1

DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015, table B-1. Figures for 2013 are an average of two different figures provided by source.

2. The crime/adversity mismatch

I turn first to contemporary proof that structural explanations do not fully account for crime differentials among structurally disadvantaged groups. Consider homicide mortality rates by race and ethnicity derived from medical examiner reports and collected by the National Center for Health Statistics. The mean African American rate for 2000–2015 was 7.4 times the white rate and 3.1 times the Hispanic rate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Yet, when we determine the percentage of each racial/ethnic population group that fell below the poverty line, we find only a slight difference between African Americans and Hispanics. The mean figures indicate that Hispanic poverty rates in the same time period were 92% of black rates.

The black/Hispanic adversity differentials in Table 2, Fig. 1 are supported by a study of 131 metropolitan areas over a two-decade period from 1990 to 2010 (Light & Ulmer, 2016). According to this study the poverty and unemployment gap between African Americans and Latinos was 3.4 and 2.9, respectively, with Latinos exhibiting the less adverse rates. Compare these gaps, however, to the extraordinary divergence between black and Hispanic incarceration rates, which is 2078, and the marked homicide mortality rate disparity, which is 15.6.

Other data sources show that black murder perpetration rates are also dramatically disproportional. FBI-reported police data indicate that from 2013 to 2016, blacks, who were 12.3% of the population, were

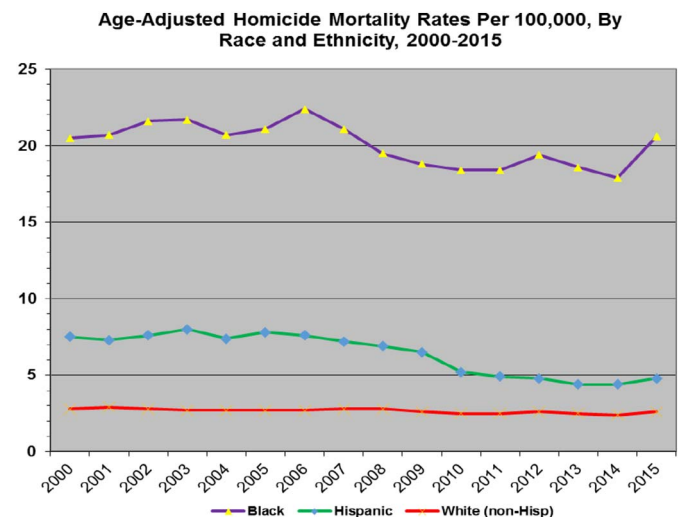


Fig. 1. Data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017).

48.6% of the homicide offenders, whereas Hispanics, 17.6% of the population, were 11.3% of the killers (FBI, 2013–2016). In other words, while African American economic disadvantages were more pronounced, they were not commensurate with the crime rate differentials between blacks and Hispanics.

Clearly there is a disconnect here between poverty/unemployment and crime. Latinos, who are either more disadvantaged than blacks or slightly less, depending on the study, engage in considerably less violent crime than African Americans. Apparently, some factor or factors other than poverty are driving black homicide rates higher than Hispanic rates.¹

The crime/adversity mismatch appears not just among American groups, but also internationally. In Great Britain, for instance, David J. Smith (2005, p. 60) observes that “all of the minority groups with elevated rates of crime or incarceration are socially and economically disadvantaged, but some disadvantaged ethnic minority groups do not have elevated rates of offending.” The homicide suspect rate in the United Kingdom was 5.4 times as high for Afro-Caribbeans and black Africans as for the general population, but it was only 2.2 times higher for Asians. This was surprising to Smith who thought that blacks were less disadvantaged than Asians educationally or in material well-being. They lived in less racially segregated neighborhoods and their experience with discrimination by the justice system and the general public seemed to be no worse than that of Asians.

Michael Tonry (1997) provides a second example: Moroccans and Turks in the Netherlands. Having first arrived as guest workers in the 1950s and '60s, both groups stayed on, and by the 1990s, they were “comparably disadvantaged economically and socially.” However, whereas crime and incarceration rates for Turks were not much above those of the native Dutch, rates for Moroccans were considerably higher. Tonry concluded: “The different offending patterns and justice system experiences of members of different groups in a country are not simply the result of group differences in wealth, social status, or political power... Not all economically and socially disadvantaged groups are disproportionately involved in crime” (1997, pp. 1, 2).

3. African American adversities and crime

I now turn to the relationship over time between the adversities of a single cultural group and the group's crime rates. We already saw the anomalous figures for 1940 and 1970. Further examination of the crime rates of African Americans in the first half of the 20th century yields additional unexpected relationships between crime and the adversity variables typically associated with it.

African Americans had elevated violent crime rates throughout the 20th century, and though the pre-1920 data are limited, back to the late 19th century.²

Fig. 2 shows homicide mortality rates by race in the United States for 1910–1949.³ The pre-1933 homicide rates are generally considered

Homicide Mortality Rates Per 100,000, by Race, 1910–1949

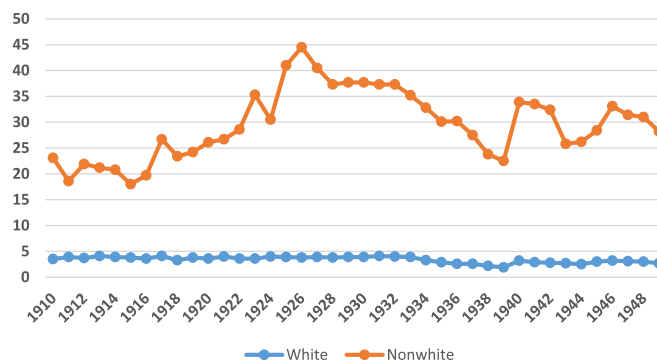


Fig. 2. Data for 1910–1939 from Linder and Grove, 1947. Data for 1940–1949 from Grove and Hetzel, 1968.

significant underestimates.⁴ Despite data deficiencies the figures are sufficiently accurate to assess racial disparities. Over this 39-year period nonwhite rates averaged 29.6 while the mean white rate was 3.4, a ratio of 8.7 to 1.

Due largely to rampant skin color discrimination black adversity persisted throughout this period. Significantly, however, many of the conditions associated with adversity today – including female-headed households, high unemployment rates, and large-scale segregated and impoverished urban communities – were not characteristic of African Americans before World War II. Consider the following:

- Prior to the 1950s, 70% or more of African-American children were raised by both biological parents (Tolnay, 2004, p. 440).
- As Fig. 3 makes clear, black unemployment rates largely tracked white rates from the 1880s to the start of World War II.⁵ Black men had higher labor force participation rates than white men in 1910 and 1930. In 1910, 87% of black males worked, 81% of white males (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1979, table 42).
- In 1910 and 1920, nearly 220,000 African Americans owned or managed their own farms in the South (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2002, p. 23).
- African Americans did not reside in “ghettos,” i.e., large-scale, impoverished, segregated communities in big cities, before the 1920s. In fact, a majority of blacks lived in rural areas through 1940, and nearly three-quarters were rural in 1910 (Gregory, 2005, pp. 131–35; Osofsky, 1963/1966, p. 135; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1979, table 6).

Despite the pronounced economic gaps between whites and blacks, African American economic conditions improved considerably as a result of the first phase of the Great Migration in the 1920s – a time when black homicide rates were rising steeply. Economic improvements were greater still in the second phase of the Migration, which began in the

(footnote continued)

homicide rates. Consequently, figures prior to 1933 underreported total and nonwhite homicide rates. Another source of inaccuracy was the combining of all nonwhite rates. However, until 1960, 95.5% of the nonwhite U.S. population was African American (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002, p. 77), so it is reasonable to treat nonwhite rates as a proxy for African American rates.

⁴ A reestimation of homicide rates by Eckberg (1995) for the period prior to 1933 is generally used by crime historians. The mean of the official figures for 1900–1932 is 5.9 per 100,000; the mean for Eckberg's reestimate for the same period is 8.5, which is 44% higher.

⁵ Black unemployment was low due to the need for agricultural labor, the predominant work activity of southern blacks and whites. Northern industry offered much better wages, but with greater risk of layoffs. The better paying jobs outside the South were a major “pull factor” for the Great Migration (Meier & Rudwick, 1966/1970).

¹ Vélez (2006) explains black/Hispanic homicide differentials in Chicago, 1993–1995, in terms “structural disadvantage.” However, she defines structural disadvantage broadly so as to include attitudinal variables such as trust of police, arguably not a “structural” factor. Pendall et al. (2016, Fig. 3) have shown that communities with high Hispanic populations in selected big cities, including Chicago, and nationwide, have higher poverty rates across the board than communities with high black populations.

² Pre-1920 data for violent crimes point to high black rates relative to whites in both North and South. For egregious murders, for instance, black prison commitment rates were nearly 19 times the white rates in the North, almost seven times the white rates in the South. Also, in the North, the black prison commitment rates for assault were 13 times those of whites and 16 times white robbery rates (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1918, pp. 89, 93). Since race discrimination was less pronounced in the northern justice system it is reasonable to infer that the figures reflect real black/white crime disparities and are not just a byproduct of bias.

³ Prior to 1933, not all states were in the Death Registration Area and therefore did not report mortality data to the federal government. In 1920, 34 of the nation's 48 states (71%) plus Washington, DC were reporting, but many of the nonparticipating states were in the South, residence for 85% of the black population, and the West, regions with high

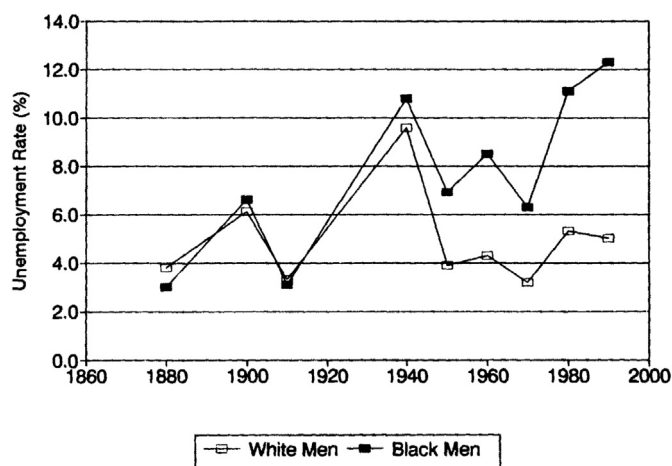


Fig. 3. Reproduced with permission from Fairlie & Sundstrom, 1997, p. 307.

1940s (Collins & Wanamaker, 2014; Gregory, 2005, pp. 102–03). Yet, the 1940s were a mixed period for black homicide, with significant escalations as well as declines.

As for whites, while conditions overall were much better than for blacks, white poverty was extensive in the prewar South. There were, in 1930, 1.4 million landless white farm families – sharecroppers or tenant farmers. They often were forced by high debt and low wages to put their entire families, including wives and young children, to work (Jones, 1992, pp. 82, 89, 101). Moreover, conditions for whites worsened dramatically during the Great Depression of the 1930s, at the end of which an astonishing two-thirds of the U.S. population (which was 90% white) was below the poverty line (Ross, Danziger, & Smolensky, 1987, p. 590; Gibson & Jung, 2002, Table 1). Despite these adversities white homicide rates were fairly flat over the entire first half of the century at a level less than five per 100,000 (Fig. 2).

While African Americans had substantially elevated rates of homicide and other violent crimes going back to the 1880s (Clarke, 1998), the variables associated with these elevated rates are quite different than those associated with contemporaneous black crime rates. The main reason for this is that blacks were an overwhelmingly rural population and many of the variables associated with urban conditions simply do not apply. In other words, elevated black crime was rural and southern before it was urban and northern.

Thus the common assumption that urban poverty and related adversities best explain high black crime rates is challenged by the history of crime. I suggest that other factors – non-economic variables – influenced black crime rates in the South as well as the North and continue to affect African American crime rates today. Below I present a cultural explanation for persistently elevated rates of violence among African Americans. It is based on the subculture of violence theory, first presented by Marvin E. Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti in the late 1960s (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967/1982), and modified in this essay.

4. The subculture of violence theory

In 1967, on the eve of the great crime tsunami, a new book on violent crime was published by Marvin E. Wolfgang, one of the leading criminologists of the day, and psychologist Franco Ferracuti. Their work, *The Subculture of Violence*, presented the following thesis (p. 158).

We have said that overt use of force or violence, either in interpersonal relationships or in group interaction, is generally viewed as a reflection of basic values that stand apart from the dominant, the central, or the parent culture. Our hypothesis is that this overt (and often illicit) expression of violence (of which homicide is only the most extreme) is part of a subcultural normative system, and that this system is reflected in the psychological traits of the subculture

participants.

Wolfgang had done a great deal of work on crime in Philadelphia (1958), and in particular, on crimes rates among African Americans. In *The Subculture of Violence* (p. 264), he and Ferracuti linked the subculture of violence to high rates of violent crime among blacks.

Statistics on homicide and other assaultive crimes in the United States consistently show that Negroes have rates between four and ten times higher than whites... [W]hatever may be the learned responses and social conditions contributing to criminality, persons visibly identified and socially labeled as Negroes in the United States appear to possess them in considerably higher proportions than do persons labeled white. Our subculture-of-violence thesis would, therefore, expect to find a large spread to the learning of, resort to, and criminal display of the violence value among minority groups such as Negroes.

The authors also observed that certain identified groups in other countries, including Colombia, Sardinia and Mexico, engaged in high levels of violent crime reflective of a subculture of violence (pp. 275–84). They even suggested that strangers to one another, such as members of different urban gangs, may share a subculture of violence because “a subculture may exist, widely distributed spatially and without interpersonal contact among individuals or whole groups of individuals” (p. 102).

Intriguing as this explanation for violent crime was, the Wolfgang-Ferracuti analysis was subjected to sharp criticism (e.g., Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Cao, Adams, & Jensen, 1997; Erlanger, 1974; Hawkins, 1983). One major shortcoming of the theory lies in the ambiguous relationship between the subculture of violence and criminal behavior. We can see the problem in the rather awkward description of black crime quoted above. One plausible interpretation of the comment appears to suggest that “learned responses and social conditions” cause high levels of violent crime among African Americans and that such crime reflects violence values. Another interpretation is that “learned responses and social conditions” cause African Americans to adhere to violence values, which in turn cause violent behaviors. It is difficult to tell therefore whether violence values are independent or dependent variables and how exactly they relate to violent crime.

Despite these problems the subculture of violence theory remains useful. It helps to explain long-term persistent violence by certain social groups and compensates for deficiencies in structural explanations. However, if a subculture of violence theory is to have explanatory benefit it must identify the relevant cultural values with as much specificity as possible and explain precisely how these values encourage violent behaviors.

I therefore suggest a clarification and modification of the Wolfgang-Ferracuti thesis, as follows. First, subculture of violence refers to values and norms that support violent behaviors by certain subcultures or groups that are part of a larger culture. These subcultures are commonly ethnic or religious subgroups in a society.

Second, these values and norms are not present in all members, nor even necessarily in a majority of members of the subculture. In a sense, the subculture of violence is a subculture of a subculture.

Third, the subculture of violence and the violent behaviors it supports often persist over long periods of time, sometimes decades, at times even centuries. This persistence adds to its significance as an explanation for crime. Indeed, the persistence of violence by a distinctive subcultural groups is an indicator that a subculture of violence is at work.

Fourth, the historical conditions supporting the development and maintenance of a group's culture of violence often can be identified. For example, in the case of African Americans the violence norms and values grew out of the post-slavery experience of blacks in the South and were perpetuated by the denial of opportunities for social advancement.

Fifth, and last, cultural values supporting violence can change when

the subcultural group moves into a position in society (such as the middle class in the United States) in which violence is eschewed because it is detrimental to the improved social status of group members. We have seen this development repeatedly in the United States with immigrant groups, such as the Irish of the mid-19th century and the Italians of the early 20th century. Both groups had subcultures of violence which ultimately were abandoned as they advanced to middle class status (Latzer, 2016, pp. 101–02).

This modified subculture of violence theory will prove valuable in explaining elevated or low violent crime rates among subcultural groups. It will be especially valuable because of deficiencies in structural explanations for crime. However, it is not enough to treat culture as a mere proxy variable in an unsatisfactory structural model. Culture must be defined and specified; it must be shown to rationally relate to crime. Here is where the history of a group can be of service.

Before going further I stress two points. First, I am *not* claiming that there is no relationship at all between structural disadvantage and crime rates. To the contrary, there is a strong relationship. Groups without serious disadvantages do not have high violent crime rates whereas disadvantaged groups often – though they do not always – have high rates. Although (as will be discussed), middle and even upper-class whites shared in the subculture of violence in the 19th century South, there was, in the 20th century, and there continues to be today, a well-established correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and violence.

Nowadays, high SES groups seldom engage in violent crime. The middle-class culture eschews violence because the benefits are far outweighed by the risks of personal injury, loss of status, and criminal justice sanctions. Plus, the civil legal system provides effective alternatives. This explains why structural advantage is correlated with low rates of violent crime and disadvantage is linked to high crime rates.

Second, I speak only of violent crime, as commonly measured by the FBI's UCR index, i.e., murder, manslaughter, rape/sexual assault, assault and robbery. I make no claims about the correlation between depth of disadvantage and property or organized crime.

5. The southern culture of honor

Throughout the 19th century white southerners were known for their extreme sensitivity to personal slights and their proclivity to engage in violence in response to perceived affronts. Historians dubbed this a “culture of honor” (Ayers, 1984; Fischer, 1989). African Americans, forced into southern culture by slavery, emancipated by war, and bound to the land by the agricultural economy, adopted much of the southern value system, including, for instance, religious practices, dietary preferences, and, most significant to this narrative, the so-called honor culture.

Although middle- and upper-class white southerners, especially plantation owners, adhered to the honor culture in the 19th century (dueling providing a notable illustration), the interpersonal violence associated with perceived personal slights was increasingly eschewed by the southern merchant and business class that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bruce Jr., 1979). The culture of interpersonal violence, however, was retained by poor southern whites and blacks.

In the case of African Americans, so long as they did not rise to the middle-class – and they were by and large prevented from doing so by the Jim Crow system – they continued to resort to violence to defend their personal dignity against perceived insults. The result was inordinately high rates of violence among both white and black southerners. Since blacks interacted mainly with other African Americans – partly by custom and preference, partly due to the racial rigidities of the southern social structure – they quarreled and fought more with other blacks than with whites. This is the cultural basis for elevated black-on-black violent crime. White homicide rates evinced comparable intraracial characteristics, helping to make the South the most homicidal

region in the United States (Harries, 1985).

Analysts as diverse as Fox Butterfield (1995) and Thomas Sowell (2005) have traced the violent acts associated with the black honor culture to the late 19th century South. They showed how these values continued to manifest among low-income African Americans in the 20th century, producing exceptionally high rates of black-on-black violence. As Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen's quantitative study (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996) demonstrated, the culture of honor theory remains compelling as an explanation for elevated southern violence in the contemporary period.

When low-income blacks migrated to the cities of the North in the 1920s, and in even greater numbers in the 1940s–60s, many of the cultural predispositions of the South, including the honor culture, traveled with them. From the late 1960s to the mid-1990s, the violent subculture of African American migrants worked synergistically with several other factors to help create one of the biggest violent crime booms in U.S. history. For migrating African Americans, the freedom of movement and anonymity of northern cities, plus the greater availability of wealth, made theft and robbery lucrative temptations. The weakening of traditional black institutions – especially the two-parent family and the church – removed constraints on anti-social behaviors. Various drug epidemics – heroin in the 1950s–70s, cocaine in the late 1980s, early 1990s – spurred robbery and theft to support addiction, as well as violence, often lethal, to eliminate distribution gang competition. The baby boom in young males, reaching their most crime prone years in the 1970s, provided the shock troops for all sorts of lawless behaviors. The result was a perfect storm of crime and disorder (Latzer, 2016, pp. 103–70).

Elijah Anderson (1999) demonstrated how the “code of the street” – a contemporary version of the honor culture – supported high levels of interpersonal violence among black youth in 1990s Philadelphia. “There is a general sense that very little respect is to be had [in the black inner city],” wrote Anderson, “and therefore everyone competes to get what affirmation he can from what is available. The resulting craving for respect gives people thin skins and short fuses” (p. 75).

Thomas Sowell (2005) characterized African Americans motivated by the honor culture as the black counterpart of “white rednecks.” “Much of the cultural pattern of Southern rednecks became the cultural heritage of Southern blacks,” Sowell asserted, “more so than survivals of African cultures, with which they had not been in contact for centuries.” Sowell maintained that black gang members “killed for such reasons as “Cause he look at me funny,” “Cause he give me no respect,” and other reasons reminiscent of the touchy pride and hair-trigger violence of rednecks and crackers in an earlier era” (pp. 27, 30).

These same observations appear to explain, at least in part, the gang shootings and killings among African Americans in big cities like Chicago in recent years. A Chicago Tribune article (Gorner, 2017) attributed much of the bloodshed in the first half of 2017 “to gang conflicts over everything from petty disputes to control of drug dealing, as well as the splintering of gangs into smaller cliques fighting over a few blocks at a time.”

Thus, even though African American violent crime rates have declined dramatically since the mid-1990s, they remain elevated compared with other low income groups, apparently driven in part by petty disputes suggestive of a black subculture of violence (Latzer, 2016, p. 241).

6. Explaining black-on-black crime

Support for the black subculture of violence theory comes from the extraordinarily high number of crimes committed by African Americans against other African Americans – the so-called black-on-black crime problem. From 1976 to 2005, 94% of black homicide victims were killed by African Americans (Fox & Zawitz, 2010). From 2012 to 2015, over 63% of nonlethal violent crimes with black victims involved African American perpetrators (Morgan, 2017).

The subculture of violence theory addresses this issue by pointing to interpersonal conflict, which strongly tends to be intraracial, as the basis for much of this crime. People commonly associate with members of the same subculture, as they are more apt to share beliefs, values and attitudes with fellow group members. Consequently, disputes leading to violence are also more likely to occur among members of the same cultural group. In the case of African Americans residential segregation reinforces these practices. Because black violent crime rates are high, black-on-black violence is likewise elevated.

A. Frustration-aggression theory

In addition to the subculture of violence explanation there are at least three other theories that address high rates of black-on-black violence. One is the Frustration-Aggression hypothesis, an early exponent of which was John Dollard, writing in the 1930s (Dollard, 1937/1949). According to Dollard, black violence against other African-Americans is the product of frustration over the all-encompassing racism of American society, a violence that would be directed at whites were it safer to engage in such behavior, but which, to avoid overwhelming counterviolence, must be redirected toward other blacks.

Implicit in this view is the notion that black crime has a social or political content, i.e., that it is an expression of profound discontent with the social order. This hypothesis is perfectly plausible given the history of virulent racism, but it has two shortcomings.

First, the offenders themselves do not seem to have been motivated by such considerations. They are driven, or so it appears, by interpersonal conflict and an intense concern with establishing respect, not some broader social goal. Perhaps such feelings of social discontent are too deep-seated to be expressed; perhaps they are hidden even from the actors themselves. Still, some demonstration of a link between black violence and black frustration over racial repression would make Dollard's explanation much more credible.

A second problem is this: if black violence is a product of racial subordination one would expect a reduction in that violence as the repression diminishes. Consequently, in the early 20th century one would have expected *less* black violence in the North where the caste system was less pervasive and less entrenched than below the Mason-Dixon line. This, however, has not always been the case. In 1925, for instance, black homicide victimization rates were higher, on average, in northern states (56.4 per 100,000 versus 41.3 in the South), and only modestly higher in southern cities (77.5 per 100,000 versus 72.5 among northern cities) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1927, tables IA, 5).

Furthermore, after the civil rights gains of the 1960s, when white racism, though far from being eliminated, was at its nadir to that point in American history, one would have expected a further decline in black violent crime. But, starting in the late 1960s, African American violent crime rates hit new peaks, most of it directed at other blacks. On the other hand, there also was an increase in black-on-white violence in this period (Latzer, 2016, pp. 128–41.)

Finally, Dollard was writing in the 1930s, a time when racially motivated lynching, though declining, was not unknown and race riots characterized by white mob attacks on blacks had occurred with some frequency only a decade earlier (Meier & Rudwick, 1966/1970; Pfeifer, 2004). Such events are far less likely today (a recent resurgence in white racist protest marches notwithstanding), which, according to Frustration-Aggression theory, undercuts both the need of African Americans to express aggression and the fear of expressing it through violence targeting whites.

B. Vigilante theory

A second alternative explanation for high rates of intraracial African American violent crime may be termed the “vigilante theory.” In its essence, vigilante theory attributes elevated African American violence to the failure of the police to apprehend, or the justice system to punish,

the perpetrators of black-on-black crime, which in turn leads African Americans to resort to violent and illegal self-help.

This explanation was expounded in Jill Leovy's recent book, *Ghettoside* (2015). “Where the criminal justice system fails to respond vigorously to violent injury and death,” Leovy asserted, “homicide becomes endemic. African Americans have suffered from just such a lack of effective criminal justice, and this, more than anything, is the reason for the nation's long-standing plague of black homicides” (p. 8).

Over three decades ago criminologist Darnell F. Hawkins (1983) presented this same theory as an alternative to the subculture of violence thesis. Hawkins wrote (p. 422):

There are several plausible explanations of black criminal homicide that are not fully included in subculture of violence theory. One such explanation is that blacks kill each other at higher rates because the legal system is seen as administering punishment unfairly. On the basis of the past behavior of the law, blacks may have come to believe that aggressive behavior of all types directed by blacks against each other will be tolerated and seldom severely punished. The only solution then becomes a kind of vigilantism for the handling of intraracial violence. Homicide becomes a form of conflict resolution.

There is evidence from the early 20th century in support of vigilante theory. It demonstrates that murderers were punished less where the victims were black. For example, a decade-long study of five counties in North Carolina in the 1930s found significant sentencing differences depending on the race of the murder victim (Johnson, 1941). Where whites had been the victims, 31% of the convicted offenders received death or life sentences; when the victim was black, 6% received such sentences, whereas 52% got 9 years or less. (Of course, the beneficiaries of this leniency were convicted black defendants, as they were responsible for the overwhelming majority of African American murders. On the other hand, black murder defendants were much more likely to be convicted. When whites murdered other whites 69% were found guilty, but when blacks killed whites the conviction rate was almost 90% and it was over 81% in the black-on-black killings.)

Likewise, a study of the death penalty in Georgia in the 1970s found disparities correlated with the race of the victims (Baldus, Woodworth & Pulaski, 1990). After controlling for 230 non-racial variables, the analysts found that killers of whites were 2.4 times more likely to get a death sentence than killers of blacks. However, use of the death penalty has dramatically declined in the United States and is no longer significant in sentencing overall. In 2000, there were 223 capital sentences in the United States, in 2016, only 31 (Death Penalty Information Center). Consequently, the current-day relevance of these 20th century findings is questionable.

What little empirical evidence there is for the present century does not support the vigilante hypothesis. A 2002 multivariate analysis of police clearances involving 50,000 violent crime incidents found that victim race had a minimal effect relative to other factors, such as victim-offender relationship (Taylor, Holleran, & Topalli, 2009; but see Briggs & Opsal, 2012). As for murders alone, a cross-tabulation of police clearances by race of offender and victim showed a 72.6% clearance rate in black-on-black killings versus 75.2% for white-on-white murders, a slender 2.6% difference.

It also must be observed – though this does not discredit the hypothesis – that there is irony in the vigilante theory. Many complaints are currently voiced about the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans (e.g., Nellis, 2016). Blacks are around 13% of the general population, but 35% of state prisoners. However, 58% of African Americans in state prisons were convicted of serious crimes of violence; only 15% had been sentenced for drug offenses (less than 4% of which had been convicted of drug possession) (Carson, 2016, app table 5). If police arrested more African Americans for major crimes – as proposed by vigilante theorists who attribute serious crime to under-enforcement – it undoubtedly would exacerbate the racial disparity in incarceration.

C. Preemption theory

O'Flaherty and Sethi (2010) explain elevated black-on-black murders through preemption theory: that blacks kill other blacks to avoid being killed. They write (p. 216):

the level of danger in an environment is itself endogenous, fueled by the extent of perceived danger or fear. Murders make for a tense situation, and in tense situations, people are quick to commit murder. A significant proportion of [black] homicides result from the escalation of disputes between acquaintances or strangers who have limited information about each other's personal characteristics. Under such circumstances expectations of violence can become self-fulfilling for particular types of dyadic interaction, and large racial disparities in rates of murder and victimization can be sustained.

Preemption theory, like vigilante theory, posits that blacks prefer self-enforcement to enforcement by the authorities. In contrast to vigilante theory, however, the motivation for the killings is personal dispute and fear of death at the hands of the adversary, not an effort to compensate for underenforcement by the authorities.

Preemption appears to be compatible with subculture of violence theory since preemption doesn't replace dispute-based killing, but rather, serves as an escalator of it. Nevertheless, the authors believe that subculture of violence theory is deficient. First, they say (p. 219), the subculture approach "would predict that the racial disparity in aggravated assault should resemble the racial disparity in murder. But it does not." That is, the disparity between whites and blacks in homicide rates is much greater than the disparity in aggravated assault rates. O'Flaherty and Sethi found, for instance (p. 219), that in 2004 blacks were 1.7 times as likely to be aggravated assault victims, whereas from 2005 to 07, they were 4.3 times as likely as whites to be murdered. Since, the authors reasoned, assaults are a product of personal disputes every bit as much as murders, the rate differentials between the offenses are unexplained.

But this same reasoning applies to preemption theory, too. Many aggravated assaults, defined as assaults with weapons or resulting in serious bodily harm, are simply failed murders. They are motivated by the same disputes as murders and subject to the same escalating effects leading to preemptive attack. Aside from O'Flaherty and Sethi's concession that blacks may underreport assaults (p. 220), an explanation for the racial disparity remains elusive. The answer may lie in the greater use of firearms by blacks, which produces more lethal outcomes and therefore more murders than aggravated assaults. Consider that the rate for firearm mortality victimizations was 10.6 as high for blacks as whites (Fowler, Dahlberg, Haileyesus, & Annest, 2015, p. 7), a differential much greater than the racial disparity for all murders.

A second reason for O'Flaherty and Sethi's rejection of subculture of violence is that they would have expected it to be most strongly manifest among blacks in rural areas whereas black homicide rates are in fact higher in urban areas (p. 219). However, as discussed earlier, the key to the black subculture of violence is its southern origins more than its rural nature. In the South, homicide victimization rates for blacks were five times those of southern whites (Latzer, 2016, pp. 211–12) while, according to O'Flaherty & Sethi, they were around four times higher for blacks than nonblacks in large jurisdictions (p. 219).

In sum, the subculture of violence theory provides a sounder explanation than rival theories for excessive black-on-black violence. It also appears to be compatible with the preemption theory.

7. Criticisms of cultural explanations

Cultural explanations raise four problems. First is the charge that they are racially biased or that they play into the hands of racists. Cultural analysis has been repudiated for its "racialization" of crime and accused of tarnishing entire communities by rendering them "precriminal and morally suspect" (Covington, 1995; Russell-Brown,

1998). This allegation is understandable where, as is the case with African Americans, the subject group has suffered grievously due to centuries of subordination and discrimination.

The racialization of crime charge is not irrefutable, however. First, the honor culture was initially attributed to whites, not blacks, and is still associated with low income white southerners (Gladwell, 2008, chapter 6). It never was a monoracial construct.

Second, African Americans acquired the culture of violence from southern whites who dominated the region throughout the 19th century. One could make the case that the black subculture of violence is, historically, a product of white cultural hegemony.

Third, cultural explanations are not the same as racial explanations. Culture refers to the characteristic beliefs, values and behaviors of a group, not its race. It is true that because of certain features of American history – the enslavement and subordination of members of a particular race and the concomitant development by that race of a distinctive subculture – race and culture were conjoined in the United States. But that is a result of the distinctive history of the country. Other nations, Cuba and Brazil, to name two, have major black populations, but cultural and racial distinctions do not necessarily align. Puerto Ricans have a substantial black population, but racial distinctions are not as socially significant as they are on the mainland because black and white Puerto Ricans share a single culture. Moreover, there are black race cultures with relatively low crime rates and white race cultures with very high rates. In the United States, for instance, Italian immigrants in the first decade of the 20th century had high violent crime rates while impoverished Haitian "boat people" in 1980s Miami had fairly low rates (Lane, 1989; Latzer, 2016, pp. 205–06).

Fourth, and finally, the percentage of African Americans estimated to share in the subculture of violence is very small, notwithstanding that the percentage of American whites who do so is smaller still. We can estimate the size of the African American population at risk for engaging in violence as encompassing those blacks who are young (roughly ages 18 to 34), predominantly male, impoverished, and residing in inner cities. In 2014, according to census data, this population totaled 900,174. Since about 10% of the killers of blacks in 2014 were black females, we will add to our total 10% of the black female population living in urban poverty, or 497,942 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This yields a grand total of 1,398,116 African Americans, which is 3.2% of the U.S. black population in 2014 (43,213,173).

Obviously, 3.2% is a mere guesstimate, and different calculations could have been made. We could, for instance, look at actual criminal activity. There were, in 2014, approximately 289,200 African Americans in state and federal prisons for crimes of violence (Carson, 2015). That same year, 147,000 more were arrested for violent crimes (FBI, 2014). Together, these figures total 436,200, which is 1% of the African American population. So this admittedly crude estimate of the size of the black subculture of violence ranges from 1 to 3.2% of the black population. This means that approximately 96.8% of American blacks do not share in this violent culture. This analysis explains why an effort to detect support for violence through an opinion survey of a sample of the entire black population was unlikely to be successful (Cao et al., 1997).

A second criticism of the subculture of violence is that it is not easily measured. Determining the values and beliefs that are associated with certain behaviors is a difficult matter. However, researcher-embedded studies, such as Elijah Anderson's (1999), can be very rewarding. New ethnographic studies of African American urban gangs hold out a great deal of promise. Carefully constructed survey research designed to elicit views on the use of violence to gain or maintain respect might also be valuable. Of course, the research design would have to give emphasis to the low-income populations most likely to manifest a subculture of violence. In addition, quantitative measures of the cross-cultural use of violence to resolve apparently petty disputes might be developed. Or perhaps church-going or other putative crime-inhibiting measures can be correlated with violence among culturally distinctive groups. As

criminologists come to see the analytical benefits of structural-cultural analysis it is likely that more research will employ this approach and researchers will develop new ways to address the issue.

A third criticism is that subcultural values may not explain certain crimes, such as rape or sexual assault, purely pecuniary offenses, such as larceny or burglary, and perhaps not even robbery, which involves violence and theft. These offenses – unlike purely assaultive crimes – are not primarily motivated by anger over perceived personal affront and efforts to ensure respect. Therefore, this is a fair criticism. However, a large number of assaultive crimes are correlated with interpersonal conflict. Consequently, if a group, such as low income African Americans, engages in a disproportionate amount of assaultive crime the subculture of violence theory will continue to provide a credible explanation for the group's behavior.

Fourth, and finally, it may be alleged that subculture of violence theory does not readily lend itself to policy prescriptions. One major reason for this is that it would clearly be improper, both legally (in the United States) and morally, to target any racial, ethnic, or other such group for differential treatment even if the group were demonstrably associated with a subculture of violence.

It also must be pointed out, however, that the prescriptive weakness of the subculture of violence theory is equally applicable to structural theories as they too do not generally support particular criminal justice policies. There may be a consensus that policies that help low-income groups advance to the middle-class, i.e., reduce their structural disadvantages, are likely to diminish their engagement in violent crime. But there are sharp ideological disagreements over the best policy choices to accomplish this. Moreover, it is clear that policies to reduce structural disadvantages are best characterized as income, housing, education or other social improvement policies, not criminal justice policies per se. In sum, the allegation that the subculture of violence theory does not translate into criminal justice policy is also applicable to the better established structural explanation for crime.

8. Conclusion

Anyone familiar with the United States in the last half-century knows that there is a serious African American crime problem. Nevertheless, perhaps because of the career risks involved in addressing such a third rail issue, criminologists have by and large avoided it. When the issue has been discussed analysts have fallen back on a structural explanation as a safe harbor. By reducing African American crime to structural variables, such as poverty, unemployment, residential segregation, female-headed households, and the like, one can deflect charges that the analyst is “blaming the victim,” or that (s)he is abetting racism. Moreover, such explanations may be aligned with policy prescriptions generally supported by the political left, such as wealth redistribution, government-run job training programs, low-income housing policies, family policies and aggressive anti-discrimination strategies (e.g., Sampson, 1987, p. 378). As a result criminologists have been able to discuss the race and crime issue with a reduced risk of censure and this has given the discipline a stake in maintaining the primacy of structural theory.

However, as demonstrated in this essay, purely structural analysis does not fully account for the crime rates of subcultural groups, nor for the disparities in crime rates between comparably disadvantaged groups.

The racial invariance debate (which properly should be called the “cultural invariance” debate) is criminology's commendable effort to question a purely structural analysis. The dispute is over whether structural variables fully explain the behavior of all cultural groups or only some. I would recast this formulation as it presupposes that structural variables are the default explanation for crime rates. History and international experience teach otherwise. They suggest that poverty and other adversities are a necessary but not a sufficient explanation for high rates of violent crime. It is time, therefore, to take

criminological analysis to the next level and seek to determine the best way to identify and measure the cultural characteristics associated with high (and low) levels of crime. Theories combining structural and cultural analysis are likely to provide the most cogent and satisfying explanation for crime, especially for crime by identifiable subcultural groups.

Declarations of interest

None

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