

Race, Crime, and Culture

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This essay is about race and crime, a topic that is itself unorthodox. For decades, but especially in recent years, academics entering this thicket have had to tread lightly, lest their careers go up in flames. Consequently, if one examines contemporary criminology and criminal justice journals one sees an overwhelming emphasis on biased treatment of minorities at the hands of the criminal justice system. There is, by contrast, relatively little work on minority involvement with crime despite overwhelming evidence of very high violent crime rates among blacks, American Indians, and some Hispanic groups. Examination of the reasons for these elevated rates seems to be of little interest to the academic community.

I first entered the danger zone in 2008, when I launched a major research project on the history of violent crime in the United States. My project focused on the many factors impinging on violent crime, not just the involvement of African Americans. On the other hand, I didn't flinch from discussing blacks and crime, especially when it was a significant consideration, such as in the great crime wave of the late 1960s to the early 1990s.

Lacuna in the Literature

Although other scholars had written histories of violent crime, their analyses were deficient in my view. One well received work focused on the nineteenth century and declared that the pattern of homicidal crimes in

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the United States was set at the end of that period. Alienation from the national government, this author wrote in 2009, “is in all likelihood one of the fundamental reasons that America’s homicide rate has been high for the past 160 years.”¹ The twentieth and twenty-first centuries were not, according to this thesis, fundamentally different from the late nineteenth.

This struck me as unsupportable since it downplays such crucial influences on crime as the ethnic immigrations and the great black migration of the twentieth century, to say nothing of the cataclysmic world wars, Prohibition, the Great Depression, and the extraordinary economic growth of the United States in the postwar period. Each of these events had a significant impact on violent crime, sometimes (as was the case with immigration and the black migration) raising rates, and sometimes (as with wartime conscriptions and the postwar growth of the middle class) lowering them. Contrary to this writer’s analysis, a “feeling of trust in government and the officials who run it, and a belief in their legitimacy” clearly were *not* the most important reasons for changes in the crime rate in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries.²

Another major scholarly work was written before it became clear that the crime downturn of the mid-1990s would last.³ That downturn was much examined by scholars and non-scholars alike and simply was too important a phenomenon to be omitted from any comprehensive discussion of crime aimed at a contemporary audience.

Other books and articles focused on homicide alone, on particular or especially sensational cases, on violence in general, and violent crime in specific cities. Several studies tried to explain the decline in crime after 1995, but not the rise that preceded it.

In short, the prevailing theoretical explanations for crime booms and busts were weak or non-existent. This meant that the crime tsunami of the post-1960s era—the biggest sustained violent crime wave in the twentieth century, perhaps the biggest in all of American history—went essentially unexplained. I was confident that there was a place for a history of crime that analyzed the great crime wave, the subsequent crime drop, and the events that led up to these phenomena. I was right about the need for such analysis. I had little idea, however, of the trials that would await me when I sought to publish my findings.

¹Randolph Roth, *American Homicide* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 387.

²*Ibid.*, 18.

³Roger Lane, *Murder in America: A History* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1997).

Getting Published—or Not

By 2010, after about two years of research and writing, the first iteration of my manuscript was completed and I set about securing a publisher. In January 2011, a Columbia University Press editor expressed interest in my work. After examining the manuscript she wrote, “Excellent. Intriguing. Tremendous effort, tons of care in documenting your observ[a]tions.”⁴ After two positive preliminary peer reviews, approval of the Press’s board (I assume), and some exchanges about suggested improvements in the work, I was offered a contract. That was in May 2011. I was delighted. Columbia was renowned as a first-class academic publisher.

I set to work on revisions and the additional chapters needed for completion. It took a bit longer than expected (doesn’t it always?), but by January 2013 the entire manuscript was finished. It was lengthy, but the topic of violent crime from the second half of the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century warranted the project’s 1,100 pages.

The next step for me was confidential peer review of the entire manuscript. For most academic publishers this is the final hurdle. Not Columbia, however, which demanded yet another review, this one by a special faculty book committee. It won’t surprise anyone with even a passing knowledge of the contemporary academic world that this proved to be my big stumbling block.

A book contract is of course no guarantee of publication, which depends on final approval of the manuscript. This is reasonable, since no publisher can be expected to put out a book with an unsatisfactory or poorly written manuscript. But if publication is denied because of inappropriate considerations, such as the ideological biases of the decision makers, the verdict will be virtually impossible to challenge.

It took until April 2013 for the second set of external reviews to come in. The two new reviewers (totally anonymous to me to this day) loved the manuscript. Reviewer number 1 wrote: “This is a significant book on an immensely important topic. The author is an elegant writer, manages to synthesize and find coherence in a bewilderingly complex interdisciplinary literature, and makes a valuable contribution to the existing scholarship.” Reviewer number 2 was, if anything, even more effusive.

Latzer’s *Violent Crime in the United States, 1880-2010* [the original title] offers a sweepingly provocative, ambitious synthesis of the history of American violent crime that skillfully bridges social history and

⁴This and all quotations from editors are from emails on file with the author.

criminology. Weighing in on most of the key debates in American crime history and criminology, this crisply written book links new findings from analysis of crime data with the insights of several generations of historians of crime and violence. While some will undoubtedly disagree with some of Latzer's arguments, all who study American crime in historical perspective will need to address his analysis. This study is more criminological than most historical studies, and more historical than most criminological studies. The book is more accessible and appealingly written than most works in either field.

I relate all this not to boast about my reviews, but so that the shocking subsequent events can be fully appreciated. On May 13, 2013 I received an email from my editor. She said that despite the glowing reviews the faculty committee was divided. Members took issue with my "culture and violence" argument (more on this—my unorthodox idea—momentarily). They would feel "more comfortable," she added, with "more reviews—particularly from preeminent African American scholars."

I was flabbergasted and furious. Racial diversity has long been an obsession for university faculty hiring and student admissions. But most defenders of these policies would never openly contend that race should be a consideration in assessing a work of scholarship. My academic friends validated my indignation, saying they too had never heard of reviewer selection by race. Leaving aside the offensive assumption of the committee that black professors would necessarily hold a different viewpoint on violent crime than white professors, shouldn't the expertise of the reviewer be the primary consideration for a publisher assigning books? It turns out the faculty committee was more interested in the politics they believed a black reviewer would bring to the evaluation of the book than with the reviewer's authority on the subject.

On July 11 I received an email from my editor accompanied by the two additional reviews, presumably by black professors. They recommended against publication. A setup? Probably. But I'll never know for sure. In response to the bottom line question of whether Columbia should publish the manuscript, one of the reviewers wrote: "No, not as is. The manuscript is not objective in its coverage of violence . . . Historically homicide is the least reported violent crime." In other words, according to this reviewer, by primarily relying on homicide rates, instead of data on other violent crimes, my pre-WWII analysis of violent crime was flawed. In fact, homicide is the *most* accurately reported crime and generally provides the *only* reliable crime data available before the 1930s. Dead bodies are difficult to hide; snatched purses often go unreported.

The “preeminent” reviewer was ignorant of the most basic facts in crime research. But of course, that didn’t matter. The faculty committee got what they wanted—a pretext for condemnation of my work.

The editor’s email went on to announce that the faculty committee had rejected my book and Columbia Press declined to publish. The principal issue, she said, was “that the statistical correlation between race and crime does not necessarily demonstrate that cultural sources fuel the higher rates of homicide.” It is true, of course, that the high crime rates of a group cannot, by themselves, demonstrate that the group’s culture caused the high rates. But I never made such a claim and to imply that I did was to reduce to a caricature my nuanced and detailed analysis. But arguing with the editor at this point was hopeless. As I understood only too well, they had made their decision and simply were rationalizing it.

Obviously, the crime and culture claim, especially as it involved African Americans, stuck in the craw of the faculty. The problem wasn’t that I didn’t support this claim with data and carefully drawn arguments—look again at the comments of the first set of reviewers—but simply that the faculty committee didn’t agree with it. Probably they thought it was a racist (or covertly racist) argument.

This is in many ways the most disturbing part of my story: that a well-written, carefully researched and positively reviewed analysis of an important issue could be suppressed simply because a handful of faculty members, undoubtedly driven by ideological considerations, disagree with its theoretical foundation. Writ large, this kind of thing could be devastating to scholarship. New but controversial analyses stand little chance of publication if a handful of ideologues can censor them. The insights such analyses provide may never see the light of day, much less stimulate the debate and discussion that is so vital to the academy. Certainly, we can all imagine views that are so extreme, so far outside acceptable scholarly boundaries, that they shouldn’t be published, especially by a reputable press. But as I’ll show, the crime and culture claim simply isn’t in that category.

Part II

So what was my sin—this claim about culture and crime—that was so egregious that the Columbia faculty felt a work so favorably reviewed by impartial experts did not merit publication? As you’ll see, the concept of culture, by itself, could not have offended them. Even a discussion of high black crime rates—hardly deniable once the facts are known—would not have been grounds for rejection. It was the use of culture to explain black violent crime rates—more

precisely, the assertion that there was (and still is) a black subculture of violence—that rankled. In the eyes of these critics of my work, identifying a subculture of violence within certain segments of the black community is tantamount to “blaming the victim.”

Subcultures of Violence

The concept of “culture” is one of the most fundamental in all of social science. It is often traced back to the late nineteenth century and the writings of Georg Simmel (1858–1918). The concept became essential to the field of anthropology as well as a mainstay of sociology, of which criminology is a subfield. Wikipedia defines culture as “the set of customs, traditions, and values of a society or community, such as an ethnic group or nation.” It describes a “subculture” as “specific practices within a subgroup of a society.” Alternatively, one might define a subculture as the subgroup of any larger collective, identified by its distinctive practices.

Cultures and subcultures don’t completely determine the behavior of the individuals that populate the group, but they strongly influence it. As I once wrote, cultures “indicate likely and predictable, but not predetermined and invariable, behaviors.”⁵ Culture explains why humans share belief and behavioral characteristics with other members of their group, characteristics that differentiate the group from other human communities. These beliefs and behaviors include such things as distinctive dress, dietary preferences, religious views, sexual practices, and especially significant here, acts of violence. As demonstrated in my work, some cultures and subcultures have a proclivity for violence, which is frequently used to establish “respect” in the community, or, to use the old-fashioned term, “honor.”

An important example of a subculture of violence is the southern white “honor culture,” a significant thesis in the work of such highly respected historians as Edward L. Ayers, David Hackett Fischer, and Dickson Bruce.⁶ Ayers explained that

Southern honor did exist, did breed violence among men of every class, did cut against evangelical Christianity and the law of the state. Without the

⁵Barry Latzer, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), 270.

⁶Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (University of Texas Press, 1979).

concept of honor, Southern violence remains inexplicable. Honor was the catalyst necessary to ignite the South's volatile mixture of slavery, scattered settlement, heavy drinking, and ubiquitous weaponry. Honor thus served to set the South apart from the North, and once established honor became an integral part of the Southern identity.⁷

This southern culture of violence has long been associated with high crime rates among white southerners—in particular, violent crime. As far back as the 1870s H. V. Redfield found that murder was four to fifteen times more frequent in the southern states than elsewhere in the United States.⁸ This southern proclivity for violence continued well into the twentieth century, and even endures in the twenty-first.⁹

Arguments that southern whites share a subculture of violence won't get your book condemned. Slamming southern whites is perfectly acceptable among intellectuals and elites. It's only when one speaks of a black subculture of violence that one steps over the line. Theoretically, of course, there's no difference. If one accepts the concept of culture and the hypothesis that a culture can encourage and support violent behaviors by a group then there is no reason why a subculture of violence should be exclusively white. In fact, as I'll show in a moment, the southern white and black subcultures are closely tied. No matter. Had I written a book solely about white southern crime, I'd wager that Columbia would never have torn up my contract.

So here's the unorthodox idea that I would like to elaborate. Blacks in the U.S., being almost exclusively southern for all of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, as well as the first two decades of the twentieth, developed their own subculture of violence in emulation of the whites around them.¹⁰ This shouldn't be surprising. Blacks adopted numerous southern white customs, beliefs, and values, including dietary preferences, religious beliefs, and even dialect. They modified these customs, beliefs, and values as suited their

⁷Ayers, 33.

⁸H. V. Redfield, *Homicide, North and South* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1880).

⁹A quantitative analysis demonstrated the vitality of the southern white honor culture in the 1990s. Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996). I found persistently high homicide mortality rates for southern whites in the twenty-first century after adjusting for Hispanic ethnicity and age. Barry Latzer, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), 214, fig. 4.18.

¹⁰For most of American history, until the Great Migration of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of blacks resided in the South. In 1910, 89 percent of the black population lived there. This dipped to 85 percent in 1920 and 79 percent in 1930. By the turn of the twenty-first century, after the Great Migration had ended, 55 percent of blacks lived in the South. U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Census Statistics*, Working Paper No. 56 (Washington, DC: G.P.O., 2002).

own circumstances, but the white southern influence was omnipresent and dominant.

Among these adaptations was the testiness and sensitivity to insult that leads to violence—violence intended to preserve the aggressor’s honor or, in modern parlance, command respect in the community. Liberal journalist Fox Butterfield noted the phenomenon in his account of the family background of Willy Bosket, one of the most notorious criminals in New York State history.

All this violence was not simply pathology. It grew out of the old white southern code of honor, an extreme sensitivity to insult and the opinion of others . . . Pud [Bosket’s violent great-grandfather], slightly changing the white man’s terminology, spoke of his reputation and demanded respect, rather than using the word “honor”. . . Over the years, “respect” was a word more and more African-Americans would use.¹¹

This violent black subculture produced high rates of black crime in the South, starting in the 1880s/1890s. During and immediately after slavery, by contrast, black violent crime rates were rather low. Late century black crime typically involved assaults, sometimes deadly, commonly over sexual jealousies, gambling disputes, perceived insults and petty quarrels. Seldom were whites the victims of these attacks, as imprisonment or lynching would almost certainly follow. When, in the early twentieth century, blacks began to move north this subculture of violence traveled with them. As I explained in my work:

One can make a strong case that impoverished African Americans shared in the southern culture of violence and transported it to the North during their migrations. There, social isolation and discrimination perpetuated a version of this culture among lower-class blacks, accounting for the high rates of black-on-black violence.¹²

In short, blacks developed a violent subculture in the South and brought it to northern cities along with other black cultural markers like jazz, the AME church, and soul food. The result was enormously elevated rates of violent crime among blacks in the North as well as the South.

¹¹Fox Butterfield, *All God’s Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 63.

¹²Barry Latzer, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), 216.

It isn't possible to explore all the dimensions of black crime in a short article, but here is a tiny piece of the evidence. In the 1920s, before the Great Depression, the U.S. economy was soaring and black unemployment rates were as low if not lower than those of whites. The Great Migration had been galvanized by World War I job openings in the North, and Chicago, a major destination for blacks, was brimming with optimism. Historians St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (both black) called 1924-29 "Fat Years": "no doubt the most prosperous ones the Negro community in Chicago had ever experienced."¹³ Yet the black homicide victimization rate in 1925 Chicago was a stunning 103 per 100,000, more than nine times the rate of Chicago whites, most of whom were impoverished ethnics. And the perpetrators overwhelmingly were other blacks.¹⁴

Chicago wasn't atypical either, at least among northern cities in the middle of the country. Homicide victimization rates for blacks in 1925 were 190 per 100,000 in Cincinnati, 101 in Cleveland, 114 in Detroit, 88 in Kansas City, and so on.¹⁵ In the South, with its Jim Crow rigidities, black violent crime rates had been high since the late nineteenth century. By the 1920s they were high everywhere.

The North, to be sure, was no bed of roses for African Americans, but there were many more opportunities for education and higher paying jobs than below Mason and Dixon's line. Nevertheless, among low income blacks, which was the vast preponderance of the population, intraracial crime soared.

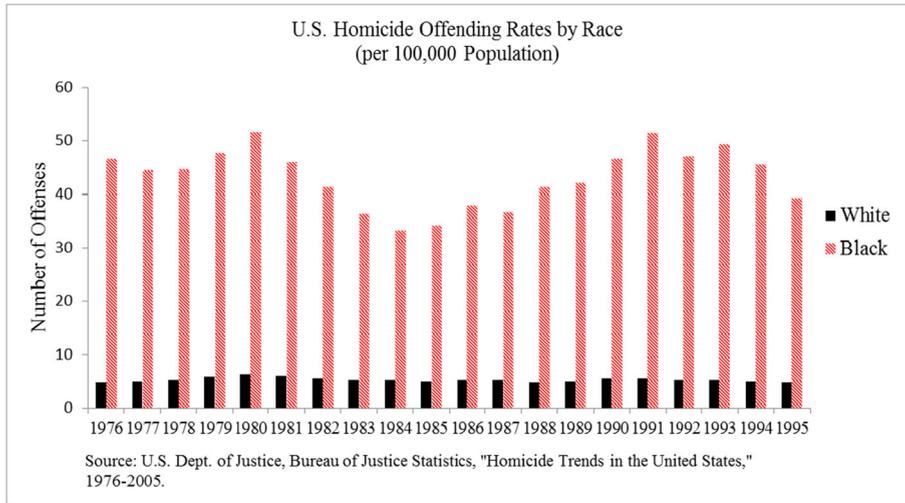
By contrast, for the ethnic immigrants with high crime rates—the Irish of the nineteenth century and the southern Italians of the early twentieth—the rise to middle-class status eroded the cultural support for violent crime. Middle-class people, after all, have much more to lose than to gain from violence. But blacks were thwarted in their efforts to move up the social ladder, blocked by Jim Crow and racial bias. Consequently, the lower income black population continued to comprise a sizeable portion of the black community and black violent crime remained consistently elevated for another century.

¹³St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 78.

¹⁴U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Mortality Statistics 1925* (Washington, DC: G.P.O., 1927), tables I A, V. Moreover, this was a time when the bootlegger wars were raging, bumping up the white murder count.

¹⁵*Ibid.* Contrary to the black reviewers who rejected my Columbia manuscript, homicide victimization rates are considered one of the most accurate crime indicators for this time period because they are based on coroner reports of the cause of death as opposed to criminal justice statistics (i.e., police, court, and prison data) which, when available, were much more unreliable. Furthermore, racial victimization figures are an excellent indicator of racial perpetrator rates because of the intraracial nature of crime, a well-established phenomenon reflecting the tendency of racial and ethnic group members to interact mainly with one another. Consequently, it is a fair inference that elevated black homicide victimization rates means high black perpetration rates.

The chart below, which pretty much speaks for itself, shows homicide offending rates by race during the “crime tsunami” years.



Of course, as my critics rightly said, high crime rates by a social group don't prove that culture caused them. But the nature of the crimes and their persistence add important support to a cultural explanation. Among low income blacks quarrel-based assaults and killings—and this was persistent behavior for over a century—were the most common types of violent crimes, much more frequent than crimes based on pecuniary motives. These crimes, I concluded, were a contemporary manifestation of the southern honor culture.

Black Violence and Southern White Culture

I wasn't the first to suggest this linkage (witness Fox Butterfield's work, cited above), though I was the first to support it with detailed crime figures, and to place it in the context of the history of violent crime in general. Academics as well as journalists endorsed the black-southern white connection. A leading criminologist of the postwar period, Marvin Wolfgang, along with his co-author Franco Ferracuti, developed a general theory of violent crime based on cultural theory. Their book, which discussed various cultures worldwide, including that of U.S. blacks, was called *The Subculture of Violence*.¹⁶

Thomas Sowell also explicitly linked black violence to southern white culture in his wittily titled *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*. Sowell characterized

¹⁶Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti, *The Subculture of Violence: Towards an Integrated Theory in Criminology* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967).

blacks 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,” he 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.”¹⁷

A well-known ethnographic study by Elijah Anderson demonstrated with vivid precision 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.¹⁸ “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.” The code’s “basic requirement is the display of a certain predisposition to violence. A person’s public bearing must send the unmistakable, if sometimes subtle, message that one is capable of violence, and possibly mayhem, when the situation requires it, that one can take care of oneself.” The result is a seemingly never-ending cycle of violence. “Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community,” Anderson wrote, “none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression.”¹⁹ Could these same words have been written about Chicago in 2018?

Given the support for my thesis among respected analysts, as well as the plausibility of the argument, to say nothing of the voluminous supporting crime data, it is shocking that Columbia Press declined to publish my work. The unspoken, but almost certainly decisive reason that my book was rejected is that the subculture of violence thesis, at least when applied to African Americans, is deemed racist.

Refuting the Racism Charge

I addressed the racism charge in a recent publication, where I made the four points I paraphrase here.²⁰

¹⁷*Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 27, 30.

¹⁸Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 32-33, 72-73.

²⁰Barry Latzer, “Subcultures of Violence and African American Crime Rates,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 54(2018): 41-49.

First of all, the honor culture was initially attributed to whites, not blacks, and is still associated with low income white southerners. It never was a monoracial construct. Second, blacks acquired the culture of violence from southern whites who dominated the region for over three centuries, and who themselves acquired this culture in the lawless and brutal “no-man’s land” of England’s northern borderlands. 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 particular developments in 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 idiosyncratic history of the country. Other nations, Cuba and Brazil, for instance, 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.

Finally, I made the point that the percentage of blacks estimated to share in the subculture of violence is very small. We can estimate the size of the black 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 percent of the killers of blacks in 2014 were black females, we will add to our total 10 percent of the black female population living in urban poverty, or 497,942. This yields a grand total of 1,398,116 blacks, which was 3.2 percent of the U.S. black population in 2014 (43,213,173). In sum, this admittedly crude calculation suggests that the subculture of violence is rejected by 96.8 percent of the African American population.

Conclusion

As should be clear, the subculture of violence thesis is not racist and, properly understood, should not be seen as encouraging racism. It must be conceded, however, that any explanation of social problems among blacks that relies on a cultural explanation is bound to draw fire. Such analysis will, as William Julius Wilson once explained, be seen as “reinforcing the popular view that negative

social outcomes—poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, crime—are due to the shortcomings of the people themselves.”²¹ Perhaps so. But to yield to such fears is to impose the kind of censorship that closes off legitimate avenues of inquiry.

My story had a semi-happy ending, but it is no tribute to Columbia University Press. In 2016, Encounter Books, a mass marketer of what might be considered serious but conservative works, published the second half of my manuscript, the part dealing with crime since 1940.

²¹William Julius Wilson, “Being Poor, Black, and American: The Impact of Political, Economic, and Cultural Forces,” *American Educator* 35 (2011): 22.