



Race/ethnicity and criminal behavior: Neurohormonal influences



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ABSTRACT

Evolutionary neuroandrogenic (ENA) theory asserts that brain exposed to androgens plus the brain's ability to learn accounts for most of the sex and age variations in criminal behavior. Here, the theory is extended to explain race/ethnic variations in offending. The article documents that among seven different racial/ethnic groups, blacks have the highest and East Asians have the lowest criminal involvement. Strictly social environmental explanations for race/ethnic differences in criminality appear to be inadequate for explaining these differences. Two main elements of ENA theory are offered in the present context: (a) criminal behavior is promoted by exposing the brain to testosterone and other androgens. (b) rapid postpubertal declines in offending depend heavily on learning ability. Ten lines of evidence concerning average racial/ethnic variations in androgen exposure are reviewed, and four lines of evidence of racial/ethnic differences in learning ability are reviewed. With some exceptions and qualifications, currently-available evidence seems to support the idea that racial/ethnic variations in offending could be at least partially explained by ENA theory. Closing comments are offered to suggest that biosocial approaches to the study of racial/ethnic variations in criminal behavior can help to supplement strictly social environmental theories in criminology.

For over a century, scholars have struggled to explain racial and ethnic differences in criminal behavior (reviewed by Gabbidon, 2015; McNulty & Bellair, 2003). In just the past five years, eight scholarly books have been published dedicated to this topic (Barak, Leighton, & Cotton, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gabbidon, 2015; Glynn, 2013; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2012; Rowe, 2012; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011; Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2011). And, in a fairly recent presidential address to the American Society of Criminology, Peterson (2012, p. 303) called for “placing race and ethnicity at the center of the study of crime and justice”.

As will be shown, nearly all past and contemporary explanations for racial/ethnic variations in criminal behavior consider only social environmental variables as relevant. The present article proposes that the inclusion of neurohormonal variables along with learning ability and sociocultural variables can provide a more complete explanation for the race/ethnic differences in offending that have been documented.

There are five parts to this article. Part I capsulates the nature of race differences in offending. Part II briefly summarizes social environmental explanations for these race/ethnic differences. In Part III, a biosocial theory is presented that could assist in understanding these differences. Part IV reviews a wide array of empirical evidence bearing on possible race/ethnic differences in exposure to testosterone and

other androgens as well as race/ethnic differences in learning ability. Part IV is further condensed in Part V in order to match theoretical predictions with the available evidence.

1. Part I

1.1. Summarizing the evidence regarding racial differences in criminality

Part I will include a description of six tables, each one summarizing conclusions derived from studies of crime rates for six different racial/ethnic groups relative to the crime rates for whites in the same country. The reason for making comparisons to whites is that most studies published on race differences in crime have been conducted in white-majority countries, principally the United States, but also Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Each table provides a “numeric snapshot” of the relevant studies according to the types of crimes sampled and whether the data were based on official crime statistics or self-reports. To conserve space, the citations themselves are not presented; instead, see the *Handbook of crime correlates* (Ellis, Beaver, & Wright, 2009, pp. 20–29).

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Table 1
Findings from studies comparing criminality by blacks and by whites. (The numbers inside each cell represent the number of studies located.)

Crime involvement relative to whites	Type and seriousness of offenses							
	Official statistics (e.g., arrest, prosecution, conviction, imprisonment data)						Self-reported data	
	Violent offenses	Property offenses	Drug offenses	Delinquency	General & unspecified offenses	Recidivism	Victimizing & overall offending	Illegal drug & use
Blacks higher/whites lower	96	2	4	75	12	17	12	4
No significant difference	0	0	0	0	0	6	20	8
Blacks lower/whites higher	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	33

1.1.1. Black-white comparisons

The first table pertains to differences in crime rates between blacks and whites. Most of the studies were conducted in the United States. As summarized in Table 1, official data are very consistent in indicating that blacks engage in crime at higher rates than do whites, especially regarding crimes of a violent nature (murder, assault, rape, and robbery). To illustrate, in a recent book on black-white differences in crime, Unnever and Gabbidon (2011, p. xv) stated the following: “African American men – about 6 percent of the population of the United States – account for nearly 60 percent of the robbery arrests in the U.S.” In the case of U.S. murders, black rates are about 5.5 times higher than those for whites (Ulmer, Harris, & Steffensmeier, 2012). Many years earlier, Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967)/2013, p. 152) observed that in Philadelphia “homicide rates for young black males was 27 times higher than for young white males, and the female rate was 23 time greater than for white females.”

In addition to the official data, Table 1 also presents a summary of the self-reported data on black-white differences. Regarding the official data, there is no disagreement that black rates are higher. However, one can see that most self-report studies have either found no significant black-white differences or that whites actually have greater involvement than blacks, particularly regarding illegal drug offenses. These inconsistencies need attention before moving on to comparisons involving other racial groups.

Some have interpreted the black-white discrepancies between official statistics and self-reported data as evidence of police biases in law enforcement activities (Turk, 1969; Quinney, 1970; Schur, 1973). However, there are at least three reasons for believing that the official data are closer to reality than the self-report data, at least regarding the most serious offenses.

First, most self-reported offenses pertain to relatively trivial crimes (misdemeanors) such as smoking pot or minor vandalism, whereas most law enforcement statistics have to do with serious crimes (felonies) such as committing assaults, robberies, and major thefts (Eaton & Polk, 1961; Pope, 1979; Schuster, 1981). A few self-report studies have attempted to eliminate the trivial offenses before making black-white comparisons. They have all concluded that blacks actually do self-report higher offending rates than whites, although the differences are still not nearly as great as the differences reflected in official data (Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse, 1986; Hill & Crawford, 1990; Peeples & Loeber, 1994).

Second, one study was able to cross-check offenses that had been self-reported as resulting in an arrest against police records of an arrest for the same individuals. It concluded that white males reported 90% of the offenses on their police records, while black males reported only 67% (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981, p. 177). A few additional studies have also indicated that blacks are more likely than whites to provide “normatively acceptable responses” to questions about involvement in crime, thereby under-reporting to a greater degree (Huizinga & Elliott, 1984; Mensch & Kandel, 1988; Aquilino & Sciuto, 1990).

Third, several U.S. studies have used data from crime victimization surveys as a way of cross-checking the accuracy of official data for violent crimes such as assaults, robberies, and forcible rapes. These studies have revealed that crime victims report their attackers to have been black at much higher rates than they report them being white. This was true for both white and black victims (Blumstein & Cohen, 1987; Hindelang, 1981; Pope, 1979; Wilbanks, 1985; Wolfner & Gelles, 1993).

Finally, it is also relevant to note that nearly all self-report studies of offending (especially those involving illegal drug use) are derived from samples of either high school seniors or of college students. Both of these sampling sources substantially under-estimate black-white differences in crime rates due to the fact that blacks have much higher high school dropout rates than whites (Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). Offending rates among all dropouts are considerably higher than the rates for those who complete high school, and especially those who go on to college (Swaim, Beauvais, Chavez, & Oetting, 1997; Townsend, Flisher, & King, 2007). Therefore, when sampling high school and especially college students, one excludes blacks who tend to offend at the highest rates, thereby under-estimating black involvement in self-reported crime relative white involvement.

Overall, the studies that are numerically summarized in Table 1 in conjunction with the qualifications just provided suggest that offending rates are considerably higher for blacks than for whites. This is especially so for serious violent crimes.

1.1.1.1. Hispanic-Anglo Comparisons. Hispanics (Latinos/Latinas) are people whose ancestors are from Spanish/Portuguese-speaking South and Central American countries. Most Hispanics are considered white, but they are distinguished from European whites – sometimes called *Anglos* – by the fact that their skin and hair are usually darker and by their typically having Spanish family names. Also, most Hispanics can trace their ancestry back to Mexico, the Caribbean Islands, or South or Central America rather than to Europe.

Nearly all studies that have compared crime rates of Hispanics with non-Hispanic whites have been conducted in the United States. Table 2 summarizes the research findings from these studies. It shows that official crime statistics agree that Hispanic crime rates are higher than those of non-Hispanic whites. These differences are especially well documented for homicide, with Hispanic rates being roughly three times higher than those for non-Hispanic whites although they are only about half the homicide rates for U.S. blacks (Centerwall, 1984; Martinez, 1996; Pokorny, 1965; Polednak, 1989; Ulmer et al., 2012).

Turning to self-reports, Table 2 shows that most studies have indicated that no significant differences exist between offending rates of Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites, and in a few cases, Hispanic respondents have reported significantly lower rates, especially regarding marijuana use (Flannery, Vazsonyi, & Rowe, 1996) and under-age drinking (Robins, Tipp, & Przybeck, 1991). However, as noted above regarding blacks, Hispanics have considerably higher high school

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