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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

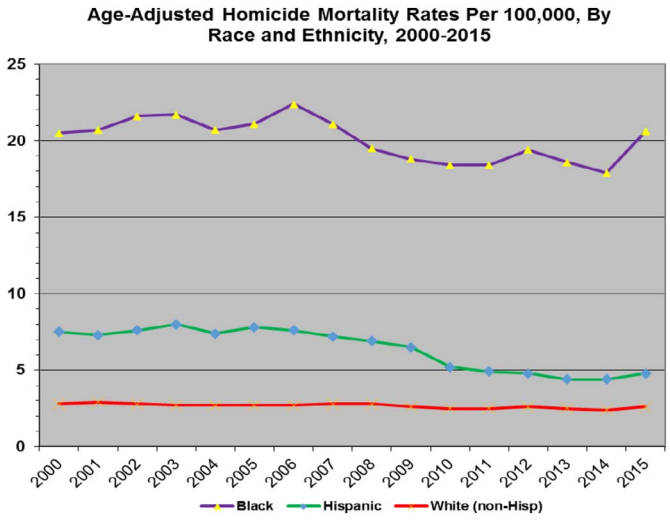

Fig. 1. Data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017).