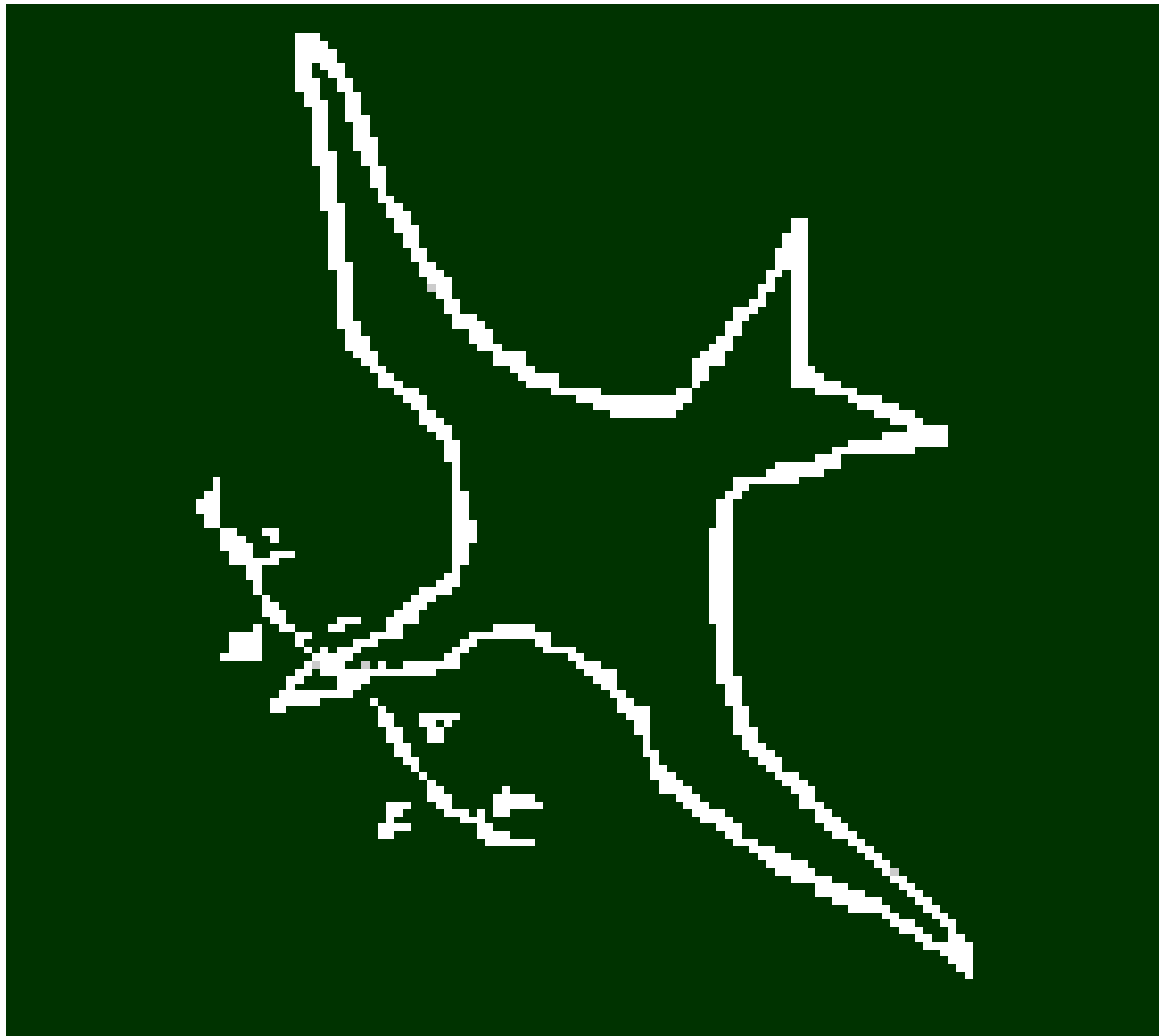


# Ethnicity, Race, Class, and Adolescent Violence

Darnell F. Hawkins



Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, acts of interpersonal violence committed by and against adolescents have symbolized the crime problem in the United States and have been said to pose a major threat to the public's health and safety. Media accounts of youths involved in drive-by shootings and other incidents involving firearms have contributed to the view that youth violence has reached unprecedented levels and that much of it is concentrated among disadvantaged minorities. In addition, government documents and studies by public health professionals have highlighted the risk of involvement in violence for African-American, Hispanic, and Native American youth, particularly members of those groups residing in the nation's largest cities (Centers for Disease Control, 1983, 1986, 1992; Fingerhut, 1993; Fingerhut, Ingram, & Feldman, 1992a, 1992b; Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1990; Prothrow-Stith & Weissman, 1991; Reiss & Roth, 1993; Rosenberg & Fenley, 1991; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986).

Like the voluminous social scientific and criminological literature, recent studies of interpersonal violence by public health-oriented investigators have raised questions regarding the relationships among ethnicity, race, social class, and involvement in violence (Hawkins, 1993a). Among the decades-old questions that have become a part of the recent discourse on violence are the following:

1. Do some racial and ethnic groups in the United States have higher rates of violence than others?
2. Are American of African, Hispanic, and Indian-Native American ancestry more violent than non-Hispanic whites or persons of Asian ancestry?
3. Is aggressive behavior more prevalent among the poor than among members of the middle and upper classes?
4. How sound is the empirical evidence used to show ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of violence?
5. To the extent that ethnic, class, and racial differences in the rate of involvement in violence can be shown to exist, how can such differences be explained? What is the contribution of socioeconomic inequality to ethnic and racial differences in levels of violence?

The goal of this paper is to critically review the empirical evidence and theories that have emerged to document and explain ethnic, racial, and class differences in the rate of adolescent involvement in interpersonal violence. My focus is on *interpersonal* violence as opposed to other forms of antisocial, illegal, and criminalized behaviors. I also attempt to limit the discussion to comparisons of ethnic, racial, and class differences *among adolescents* as opposed to other age-groups. But, as I note later, these goals could not always be achieved.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first, recent data are presented on the incidence of violence among adolescents in the United States as documented in official reports. Of interest is the comparative rate of violence found among youth as compared to other age-groups and the extent of change in this rate over time. Data are also assembled to describe the ethnic and racial characteristics of adolescent victims and offenders. An attempt is made to use definitions of adolescence and interpersonal violence that are consistent with those used by the Center for the Study and Prevention

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of Violence (CSPV). CSPV defines interpersonal violence as assault with intent to injure or cause physical harm. Emotional and verbal violence are not areas of emphasis, although they are recognized as important subjects for study. The Center defines adolescence as the age range of 13 through 18. However, it does collect data and research studies involving persons younger than age 13 and older than age 18. Similarly, data for young adults are presented at times in this review.

The second section of this paper explores some of the major problems of conceptualization and measurement that must be considered when interpreting findings of ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of youth violence. Much of the discussion is derived from perennial and unresolved debates among sociologists and criminologists. Nevertheless, an examination of the arguments raised in these debates is an important part of any critical evaluation of the reliability and validity of data purporting to show ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of youth violence.

With the current trend toward viewing violence as a public health problem, the prevention of youth aggression has become a major objective of state and local public officials and federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). The varying levels of risk across ethnic, racial, and social class lines may have important implications for their efforts to devise successful intervention and prevention strategies. Thus, the third section assesses the relevance of documented group differences for devising policies and programs to reduce the incidence of adolescent violence.

### **Historical and Ideological Contexts**

The question of whether social class, ethnic, and racial (particularly black-white) differences in levels of crime and criminal violence exist would seem to be one of the least controversial and debatable issues in modern social science. For most of the twentieth century, federal commissions and agencies, and social analysts from a variety of disciplines, have used criminal justice system data, ranging from arrest to imprisonment records, to compare rates of crime and violence across social and demographic groups in the United States. Among their findings have been high rates of serious assaultive violence, homicide, and nonviolent property crime among the poor of all races, among some white ethnic immigrant groups, and among disadvantaged nonwhite minorities.<sup>1</sup>

In describing ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of crime and violence, social analysts have, since the late 1960s, written of “gaps,” “overrepresentation,” “overinvolvement,” “disparities,” and “disproportionality.” Most studies of crime in the United States during this period have noted, for example, high rates of assault, robbery, rape, homicide, and other “street” crime among persons of African ancestry. Many have also noted the extent to which Native Americans and some populations of Hispanics also experience comparatively high rates of crime and violence. In recent years, the notion of an urban underclass has been used to emphasize the importance of social class status in determining risk of involvement in crime and violence (Sampson & Wilson, 1994; Wilson, 1987).

Still, social analysts have, understandably, approached the question of whether there are ethnic, racial, and social class differences in the rate of involvement of individuals (particularly as offenders)

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in crime, violence, and other forms of social behavior with hesitancy and caution. In the not too distant past the issue was used as fodder for propagandists bent on proving the biological and social inferiority of certain ethnic and racial groups and to support social policies based on such conclusions (Gould, 1981; Hawkins, 1995). Both the 1911 study by the U.S. Immigration Commission and the 1931 National Commission on Law Observance and enforcement's *Report on Crime and the Foreign-Born* reflected the eugenics-inspired xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments of those decades and earlier. Indeed, the Willie Horton incident during the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign illustrated the continuing political salience of the issue of race, ethnicity, and crime in the late twentieth century. And the recent debate surrounding the publication of *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray showed that, among some people, the belief still exists that ethnic and racial disparities in crime involvement and other social behaviors are the result of genetic differences across groups.

The politicization of the question of whether class, ethnic, and race differences in rates of crime and violence exist appears to have led many competent social analysts to avoid research on the subject or, when discussing the topic, to avoid taking positions thought to support reactionary political interests (Hawkins, 1990, 1993B, 1995; LaFree, 1995). Nevertheless, there have been social scientists, beginning with DuBois (1899), Sellin (1928), and Sutherland (1924), who have tackled the difficult task of examining and explaining ethnic, race, and class differences in crime. To a great extent, they have succeeded in creating a body of research that is not characterized by the social Darwinist rancor that permeated many late nineteenth and early twentieth century discussions of this subject. More recent social scientists who have tackled the subject include Tittle and Villemez (1977), Hindelang (1978), Tittle, Villemez, and Smith (1978), McNeeley and Pope (1981), Tittle (1983), Sampson (1985, 1987), Flowers (1988), Harries (1990), Lynch and Patterson (1991), LaFree, Drass, and O'Day (1992), Hagan and Peterson (1994), Sampson and Wilson (1994), Hawkins (1993b, 1995), and LaFree (1995).

The less rancorous tone of these studies, when compared to those of the social Darwinists, has not meant that their reported findings have not been controversial. As in the legal arena, social scientific evidence and findings are seldom, if ever, incontrovertible. Both during the past and today, researchers have debated the soundness and adequacy of the "proof" of ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of crime and violence. They have also disagreed about the meaning and "causes" of the group differences observed. Such debates have existed from the beginning of modern social scientific research on the subject.

For example, while acknowledging that some white ethnic groups had higher rates of reported crime than others, Sutherland (1924, 1934) and Sellin (1938) challenged the widely held belief that the foreign-born had significantly higher rates of crime and violence than native whites at the turn of the twentieth century. Echoing the arguments of these researchers, McCord (1995) suggested that studies of the comparative criminality of foreign-born and native whites living during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were flawed because they failed to consider the effects of economic inequality. She argued that academic studies and government reports also failed to appreciate the role of inequality in producing the seeming ethnic disparities of the period, for example, the reportedly high rates of crime and violence found among the Irish and Italians as compared to other white ethnic

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groups. McCord suggested that when members of various turn-of-the-century ethnic groups or foreign- and native-born individuals of comparable socioeconomic status are compared, their rates of involvement in crime are similar. Brown and Warner (1992, 1995) building on theories developed by Blalock (1967) and Jackson (1989), suggested that the higher crime rates of many turn-of-the-century white immigrants largely reflected the more aggressive policing of their communities as compared to the policing of native white areas.

### **Connecting Ethnicity, Race, Class, and Violence among Adolescents: Caveats and Limitations**

Several barriers exist to achieving the objectives outlined for this paper. Their existence suggests that it is questionable whether a review of the kind attempted here can truly be called a state-of-the-art assessment. Thus, before addressing the question of ethnic, racial and class differences in rates of adolescent violence, these constraints must be identified and their impact on the present review understood. These barriers range from problems in the way that official records of crime and violence are compiled to biases (ideological and methodological) found in the social scientific study of these phenomena.

Ironically, the abundance and diversity of studies of crime and violence pose the first hurdle that must be confronted. Even a cursory review of the criminological literature reveals that thousands of empirical studies of crime and violence have been conducted in which ethnicity, race, or social class has been analyzed as a potential correlate. In addition, many purely theoretical accounts of the interconnections among these factors have been published. A review such as that attempted in this paper obviously cannot summarize all of these investigations, or even all recent studies that have targeted adolescents. Hence, this review is selective by both design and necessity.

I have chosen to review those empirical studies and essays that have explicitly addressed the nature of the relationship between class, ethnicity, race, and violent behavior, and, where possible, I have limited the review to those studies that have distinguished violence from other forms of criminal and antisocial behavior. At the same time, my review also includes reference to many general accounts of race, class and ethnic relations in the United States. The majority of the studies reviewed here were conducted by criminologists, sociologists, and public health analysts; few studies conducted by psychologists and psychiatrists are included, partly because these disciplines have paid minimal attention to the analysis and explanation of ethnic, racial, and class differences in violence.

### **Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Governmental Record Keeping**

Historically, neither census data nor crime reports (the most commonly used violence statistics) have permitted the kind of aggregation or disaggregation needed for researchers to determine with certainty whether and to what extent the diverse racial, ethnic, and class groups in the United States differ in their rates of involvement in violence. The enumeration of some population groupings has been nonexistent, while other groupings have been frequently counted and compared. Black-white comparisons have been the most ubiquitous, largely because of the greater availability of crime and census data for both of these large, easily labeled groups than for other ethnic and racial groups.

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Researchers have long noted that the broad racial and multiethnic categories used for census and crime reporting purposes may conceal many potentially significant differences in the rate of involvement in violence across white and nonwhite ethnic populations.

For instance, the governmental category consisting of persons of Asian or Pacific Island ancestry in the United States has generally shown a comparatively low rate of reported crime and violence. However, some of the subgroups within this population are known to have relatively high rates of crime and violence when compared to other subgroups in the category and to whites. The category contains ethnic groups that have been described as “model minorities” (Japanese American and frequently also Chinese Americans) partly on the basis of their comparatively low crime and violence rates, but it also includes groups that today appear to have comparatively high rate of violent crime (e.g., recent Southeast Asian refugees).

Similarly, the population labeled “white” contains a diverse array of ethnic groups, many of whose experiences with the U.S. criminal justice system have been quite different both in the past and today. As noted earlier, many studies of crime and violence during the late nineteenth century reported comparatively high rates of arrest for Irish, Italian, Greek, and other “new” immigrant populations; yet, neither recent crime nor census data have permitted such ethnic comparisons in rates of crime and punishment. Current data sources permit comparisons only of Hispanics and non-Hispanics, and even this contrast has been limited by a paucity of official data. In addition, the category “Hispanic” obviously contains a wide range of ethnic diversity that is not captured in a Hispanic-Anglo dichotomy (Hawkins, 1994a, 1994b, 1995).

One area in which the importance of considering ethnic differences among whites (and nonwhites) can be seen is in the work of analysts who have examined and sought to explain the comparatively high rates of victimization and offending found among whites living in the southern United States (see, e.g., Gastil, 1971, 1975; Hackney, 1969; Huff-Corzine, Corzine, & Moore, 1986; Loftin & Hill, 1974; Messner, 1983; O’Connor & Lizotte, 1979). These analysts have asked why southern whites, arguably an ethnic as well as a regional group, have higher rates of interpersonal violence than whites in some other areas of the United States, notably portions of the Northeast and the Upper Midwest. However, left unanswered by these studies is the question of whether these differences in the rate of interpersonal violence correspond to differences in the *ethnic* composition of the white population across regions or are explained by other factors (e.g., socioeconomic inequality; Hawkins, 1993b).

Ethnic comparisons among Euro-Americans in the study of crime and violence are as compelling and worthwhile from a social scientific point of view as are black-white, Asian-white, and Hispanic-Anglo contrasts. For example, the gap in the rate of homicide is as great for southern versus northern whites as it is for whites versus Asians (see, e.g., the annual Uniform Crime Reports; Flowers, 1988; and Harries, 1990, chap. 4). In addition, the southern white homicide rate is much closer to that of African-Americans than it is to the rate found among whites in many regional clusters outside of the South. The study of such contrasts may have important implications for efforts to understand the causes of interpersonal violence and to devise plausible violence prevention strategies as the nation moves toward the acceptance of violence as a public health concern (Hawkins, 1993a, 1994b).

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Social researchers studying the relationship between ethnicity, as opposed to race, and crime or violence are clearly hampered by a lack of official data in most instances. As a consequence, extant social science literature is characterized by a glaring inattentiveness to ethnic differences in rates of interpersonal violence, whether the potential contrast is among whites or the distinct ethnic groups that comprise populations of Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and African-Americans. Because of the constraints posed by official crime statistics, this review is largely a discussion of differences between African- and European Americans in rates of adolescent violence.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, although this paper is ostensibly a review of social class differences in rates of adolescent involvement in violence, such a review is also a nearly impossible task given problems of data availability similar to those found in the enumeration of ethnic and racial groups. Most sources of criminal justice data, including arrest, adjudication, and sentencing statistics, do not provide information on the socioeconomic status of the perpetrators or victims of crime and violence. Some unofficial sources of violence data such as victimization and self-report studies do permit such a linkage, but frequently even these sources do not include detailed and comprehensive measures of the social class status of victims and offenders. Thus, most of the efforts of researchers to examine the relationships between poverty, inequality, and other aspects of social class and crime or violence have involved the use of ecological; or areal, analyses. This analytic approach characterizes those studies that have used multivariate statistical methods to probe the relationships between poverty, inequality, joblessness, and criminal violence. Sampson and Lauritsen (1994) provided an excellent review of these studies. By definition ecological and areal studies of violence do not require or permit a linking of the socioeconomic traits of *individuals* with their levels of involvement in crime or violence.

Similar problems plague the death certification data used by public health analysts in studies of violence patterns and trends. Like arrest reports, these records provide no data on the occupational status, income, or other socioeconomic status (SES) attributes of the deceased. However, beginning in 1990, death certification records have provided information on the educational attainment level of the decedent. In the future, such data may be useful for documenting and studying the effects of at least one dimension of the socioeconomic status of victims of violence.

### **Interpersonal Violence as a Neglected Area of Investigation**

Despite a seeming abundance of studies of crime and violence, the literature on this subject poses problems for those who attempt to review it and summarize findings. Especially in the past, criminological researchers and theorists tended to treat acts of aggression and violence (whether committed by adults or adolescents) as merely one component of the categories of human behavior labeled “crime,” “deviance,” and “antisocial” conduct. Because of the tendency to lump together violent and nonviolent acts, researchers have most often sought to identify correlates and causes of *all* crime or of global categories of criminal and deviant conduct. Many empirical analysts and theorists appear to presume that the correlates and causes of acts of interpersonal violence are identical to those for various forms of nonviolent crime and acts of nonconformity.

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Most of these analysts are interested in the question of whether crime rates (for all types of offenses combined) differ across ethnic, racial, and class groups; there, they often do not treat violence as a distinct form of crime or social behavior. Multivariate analytic models often include a “laundry list” of crimes for which researchers seek to identify significant demographic and other correlates. Even when analytic models have included interpersonal violence, composite “violent crime indexes” have often been constructed. Such indexes usually combine rates for murder, rape, robbery, and assault into a single category or variable.

It is true that studies of the ecological distribution and social patterns of homicide have been conducted since the 1930s (see, e.g., Brearley, 1932; Henry & Short, 1954; and Wolfgang, 1958) and that robbery and rape have sometimes been studied as unique and distinct categories of crime. However, Dunn (1976) noted the failure of researchers to study and distinct patterns of nonlethal assaults as compared to homicides. Only since the mid-1980s have researchers begun to study the ecology and patterning of nonlethal forms of violence as unique and etiologically distinct forms of social behavior or crime. Thus, knowledge of ethnic, racial, and class differences in the rate of involvement in female battering, child abuse, and various forms of nonintimate, nonfatal assaultive violence is still limited. The recent summary report of the National Research Council (Reiss & Roth, 2993) and its companion volumes arguably offer the first comprehensive survey of research on the many varied forms of both lethal and nonlethal interpersonal violence and aggression.<sup>3</sup>

### **Studying Violent Adolescents**

The problem of missing data and misspecification found in the general study of violence are confounded in research on adolescents. Although numerous empirical studies of violence have been conducted and theoretical discussions held, most have added little to the understanding of ethnic, racial, and class differences *among adolescents*. This failure is largely due to the fact that the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), upon which researchers have traditionally relied for data, has not routinely included information fully disaggregated by age, race, and ethnicity. Thus, when using this report, researchers have not been able to calculate precise race- and age-specific rates of offending for homicide, robbery, rape, assault, and the like. The UCR has routinely reported arrest data for two groups: those for persons over 18 years of age and those for persons under 18. Adolescents are, of course, the majority of offenders in the under-18 group, but such aggregated data do not allow researchers to determine if rates for 15-year-olds, for example, differ from those for 17-year-olds. As noted later in this paper, alternative means of data collection, such as victimization surveys and self-report studies, allow researchers to estimate such rates, but they, too, are not without their critics.

As a result, much of what is known about the actual distribution and correlates or causes of ethnic, racial, and class differences in levels of violence among adolescents has been inferred from more generalized data on entire populations and from social scientific theories and explanations derived from such data. Such explanations either are presumed to be applicable to all age-groups or appear to be largely aimed at the conduct of adults only. Their applicability to adolescent violence rests on the plausible, but debatable, presumption that the social forces said to affect levels of violence among adults similarly affect aggression among youths.

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## **RECENT RATES, TRENDS, AND GROUP DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE**

Having noted these barriers and limitations, I now turn to recent research and official data on the involvement of adolescents in interpersonal violence. The statistical data presented here are largely illustrative. They are presented as examples of the kind of evidence most often used to document the level of adolescent violence in the United States and the extent of race, class, and ethnic disparities. However, before considering ethnic, race, or class differences in adolescent violence, I will briefly explore the issue of the overinvolvement of adolescents, as compared to adults, in acts of interpersonal violence.

### **Adolescence and Interpersonal Violence: What is the Connection?**

In modern industrialized societies, high levels of antisocial conduct, including interpersonal violence and aggression, have traditionally been associated with adolescence and early adulthood. Although the risk of involvement in violence, as either victims or offenders, continues through all stages of life, the years of adolescence and young adulthood are characterized by much higher rates of both perpetration and victimization than are other years. Adolescents have been shown to have higher rates than younger children and adults for both minor and serious forms of violence (Earls, Cairns, & Mercy, 1993; Harries, 1990; Osgood, O'Malley, Backman, & Johnston, 1989; Reiss & Roth, 1993; and Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Of course, criminologists have long noted the high rates of both property and violent crime found among adolescents and young adults.

Whether the link between adolescence and violence is attributable primarily to the developmental (physiologic and psychologic) stresses that accompany this period of transition or to other, larger, societal factors has been the subject of continuing debate. Factors ranging from the "excess" energy of adolescents to their temporary detachment from the family and other social institutions have been cited as potential causes of their greater involvement in violence and other antisocial conduct. Goodman (1960) suggested that the adolescence-to-adulthood transition is more problematic in the United States and other industrialized, Western societies than in more traditional cultures. Much like sociological theorists of crime and deviance, Goodman proposed that the social behavior associated with various stages and transitions of life is affected by the structure and organization of society. Earls et al. (1993, pp. 287-292) proposed that both developmental and social-environmental factors must be considered when attempting to explain the elevated risk of violence found among U.S. adolescents today. Whatever the precise nature of the structural, environmental, and developmental forces that contribute to the elevated rates of adolescent violence, the years between 12 and 20 appear to be the peak ages for involvement in both minor and major acts of violence and aggression.

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## **Are Adolescents Becoming More Violent?**

As noted earlier, a widespread public perception during the late 1980s and 1990s has been the view that children and adolescents today are more likely to be involved in acts of violence than their counterparts were in the past. Media accounts of child and youth murderers and murder victims have become commonplace. For example, during 1993 the *Chicago Tribune* reported each incident in Chicago involving the killing of children and adolescents and published a special year-end summary of all the cases ("Killing Our Children," 1994). Incidents involving two 11-year-olds suspected of murder in Chicago during August and September of 1994 received banner coverage from both daily newspapers and local television stations. The incidents were also reported on the national news programs of the major television networks. In each instance, the coverage included questions about a recent rise in violence against and committed by children and youth. How grounded in the facts are these perceptions of increasing rates of youth aggression?

Evidence presented by Tolan and Guerra (1994, citing Steffensmeir, Allan, Harer, & Streifel, 1989; and Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990) suggests that the modal age for involvement in serious and lethal injuries has decreased over time. Fingerhut et al. (1992a, 1992b) and the Centers for Disease Control (1992, 1994) reported that firearm mortality rates among 15- to 19-year-old urban youth rose markedly in the late 1980s. The 1994 report of the Centers for Disease Control indicated that from 1985 to 1991 the homicide and nonnegligent manslaughter rates for males between the ages of 15 and 19 increased by 127%. By 1991 males of these ages were more likely to be arrested for murder than were males in any other 5-year age-group.

While providing evidence of increases in the rate of violence among juveniles, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice has both supported and challenged some of the current perceptions of adolescent involvement in serious violent crime in the United States. Defining juvenile arrests as all arrests for persons under the age of 18, the OJJDP reported that for 1992 the juvenile proportion of total arrests for violent crime as measured by the UCR's Violent Crime Index was 18%. Juveniles made up 15% of all arrests for murder, 16% for rape, 26% for robbery, and 15% for aggravated assault (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994a). Contrary to the portrait of the typical violent offender as a teenager, the OJJDP reported that an estimated 81% of the increase in the Violent Crime Index between 1983 and 1992 was attributable to adults. But, consistent with Fingerhut and colleagues (1992a, 1992b) the OJJDP reported that the rate of increase for the involvement of juveniles in murder (28% of the 1983-1992 change) was greater than the overall average. The OJJDP further noted that the juvenile contribution to the violent crime upswing was far greater than in the past (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994b).

Data on juvenile victimization rates for 1992 provided by the OJJDP (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994d) even more graphically illustrate the elevated risk of violence among U.S. adolescents. Table 1 shows changes in the rate of violent crime victimization, excluding homicide, for persons of ages 12 to 17 in the United States between 1987 and 1992. During these years, the violent crime victimization rate for juveniles increased by nearly 14 per 1,000.

**Table 1. Changes in Violent Crime Victimization Rates Per 1,000 from 1987 to 1992 for Persons of Ages 12 to 17**

	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	Percent Change	
							1987-1992	1991-1992
Population	20,756,000	20,346,000	20,049,000	20,102,000	20,370,000	20,909,000	0.7	2.6
Total Victimizations	1,258,000	1,245,000	1,294,000	1,328,000	1,448,000	1,552,000	23.4	6.7
Crimes of Violence <sup>a</sup>	60.6	61.2	64.6	66.0	71.1	74.2	22.5 <sup>b</sup>	4.3
Completed	24.3	22.8	24.3	26.1	26.5	25.0	2.7	-6.1
Attempted	36.3	38.4	40.2	39.9	44.6	49.3	35.8 <sup>b</sup>	9.5
Robbery	8.1	8.7	10.3	11.3	10.3	10.9	35.3	6.1
Completed	4.4	5.9	6.9	7.9	6.4	6.4	46.6	0.6
Attempted	3.7	2.7	3.5	3.5	3.9	4.5	21.9	13.8
Assault	51.0	52.0	52.9	53.2	59.1	61.8	21.2 <sup>b</sup>	4.4
Aggravated	15.4	16.4	14.2	16.0	15.2	20.1	30.5	24.2
Simple	35.6	38.7	37.2	43.9	41.8	17.2	-17.2	-5.2

<sup>a</sup>Includes data on rape not displayed as a separate category.

<sup>b</sup>The difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice (1994d, Table 1).

In Table 2, the violent crime victimization rates for juveniles in 1992 are compared with those for older age-groups. High rates of victimization are seen for both juveniles (12-17) and young adults (18-24). The rate per 2,000 for these age-groups was nearly twice the victimization rate for 25- to 34-year olds and was about five times the rate for those over 35. The rate of assault victimization for juveniles was also twice that for 25- to 34-year-olds and was almost six times the rate for those over 35. These data, obtained from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), formerly the National Crime Survey (NCS), provide a better measure of adolescent involvement in violence than do FBI arrest data.

**Table 2. Violent Crime Victimization Rates Per 1,000 in 1992 by Age**

	12-17	18-24	25-34	35+	Total
Crimes of Violence <sup>a</sup>	74.2	74.0	37.6 <sup>b</sup>	13.9 <sup>b</sup>	32.1
Completed	25.0	28.2	14.7 <sup>b</sup>	4.8 <sup>b</sup>	11.7
Attempted	49.3	45.7	22.9 <sup>b</sup>	9.1 <sup>b</sup>	20.4
Robbery	10.9	13.0	7.7	2.9 <sup>b</sup>	5.9
Completed	6.4	8.0	5.1	2.2 <sup>b</sup>	3.9
Attempted	5.4	5.1	2.7	0.7 <sup>b</sup>	2.0
Assault	61.8	58.8	29.4 <sup>b</sup>	10.7 <sup>b</sup>	25.5
Aggravated	20.1	22.0	9.3 <sup>b</sup>	4.1 <sup>b</sup>	9.0
Simple	41.8	36.8	20.1 <sup>b</sup>	6.5 <sup>b</sup>	16.5

<sup>a</sup>Includes data on rape not displayed as a separate category.

<sup>b</sup>The difference from the 12-17 age-group is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice (1994d, Table 2).

Consistent with expectations derived from theory and past research, these data show that adolescents have experienced disproportionate rates of violent crime victimization in comparison to other age-groups. Even if the growth in rates of violence among youth has not been as explosive as media accounts sometimes depict, adolescence remains a period of heightened risk for involvement as both victims and perpetrators in homicide, assault, robbery, and various other forms of nonlethal violence.

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## **Ethnic and Racial Differences in Rates of Adolescent Violence**

Having presented data that arguably prove that adolescents, and even the preteens among them, disproportionately commit and are victimized by acts of serious violence and aggression, I now turn to the question of ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of adolescent violence. Extant data, some of which are presented below, suggest that the effects of forces contributing to the high and reportedly rising rates of adolescent (and nonadolescent) violence are neither spatially uniform nor universal. Both geographic and demographic patterns are evident. Much high rates of officially reported violence are found in the central cities of the nation's largest urban areas than in other areas. Further, although adolescence is a period of heightened violence, an individual adolescent's risk of perpetration and victimization appears to vary depending on the ethnic, racial, or class group to which he or she belongs. These regional and demographic disparities are especially evident for the more serious forms of interpersonal aggression, notably homicide.

### **Murder and Manslaughter: Ethnic and Racial Disparities**

As noted, much of our understanding of ethnic, race, and class differences in the involvement of youth in interpersonal violence must be derived from research and theory that was not always designed to take into account age differences. Since the early 1990s, hundreds of empirical investigations using arrest and death certificate data have shown higher rates of murder and manslaughter for some ethnic and racial groups than for others. These investigations include numerous studies of people within a single city as well as comparative analyses of people across several cities, states, or Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs). All have reported African-Americans to have consistently higher rates of homicide than other nonwhite and white Americans (see, e.g., Bailey, 1984; Blau & Blau, 1982; Block, 1975, 1985; Boudouris, 1970; Brearley, 1932; Crutchfield, Geerken, & Gove, 1982; Gastil, 1971; Huff-Corzine et al., 1986; Loftin & Parker, 1985; Lundsgaarde, 1977; Messner, 1982, 1983; Pettigrew & Spier, 1963; Pokorny, 1965; Rose & McClain, 1990; Voss & Hepburn, 1968; Wilbanks, 1984; Wolfgang, 1958).

Recent FBI UCR arrest data, shown in Table 3, illustrate the kind of race disparities reported in these investigations. The table shows homicide rates between 1986 and 1990 for the four major racial groups in the United States traditionally enumerated by the U.S. Census. Consistent with earlier studies and arrest reports, Asian American has the lowest rates during this period, followed by whites. The African-American rate per 100,000 in 1990 was more than 16 times the Asian rate, nearly 6 times the Native American rate, and nearly 7.5 times the rate for whites. In 1991, 54.8% of all persons arrested for murder and nonnegligent manslaughter in the United States were African-American (Maguire, Pastore, & Flannagan, 1993, p. 434). These data clearly document the disproportionate involvement of African-Americans in homicide. Other studies have shown that this level of disproportionality between African-Americans and other races in rates of homicide victimization and offending has persisted from most of the twentieth century (Brearley, 1932; Harries, 1990; Hawkins, 1986; Pettigrew & Spier, 1962; Zahn, 1980).

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**Table 3. Homicide Rates by Race**

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Year	White	African-American	Native American	Asian American
1986	5.42	35.76	12.15	4.40
1987	5.41	34.07	9.69	2.85
1988	4.77	34.16	8.40	2.70
1989	6.09	48.83	8.44	3.27
1990	5.24	39.05	6.65	2.41

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Source: Supplemental Homicide Reports of the Uniform Crime Reports.

Whereas most earlier studies of homicide highlighted black-white differences, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported in 1986 (p. 8) that *all nonblack minority* races, with the exception of Asians or Pacific Islanders, are also at increased risk of committing or being victims of homicide relative to whites. This racial disparity was found to exist for both males and females in almost all age-groups. But, among the 13 categories of nonblack minority races identified by the 1980 census, homicide rates for Native Americans were among the highest. For 1980, for example, the CDC reported that Native American homicide rates were 70% higher than those for whites. For 1982, Native Americans, who made up 12% of the nonblack minority population, were victims in 43% of all homicides among persons in this group.

The Centers for Disease Control (1986) also compared black, white Hispanic, and white non-Hispanic homicide rates for the five southwestern states in which the Mexican population is concentrated (Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas). Age-adjusted rates per 100,000 for the 6-year period between 1977 and 1982 were as follows: Anglo, 8.1; Hispanic, 22.2; black, 47.4 (CDC, 1986, p. 28). Similar overrepresentation of Hispanics among those murdered in Los Angeles between 1970 and 1979 was reported in a study conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles and the Centers for Disease Control (1985).

### **Adolescents and Homicide**

To what extent are the overall group differences in homicide rates also evident among adolescents? The most widely used source of official data on homicide, the Supplemental Homicide Report (SHR) of the Uniform Crime Report, does not provide population-based rates for adolescents. Thus, these data cannot be used to calculate rates per 100,000 as is commonly done when comparing racial and ethnic groups of adults. The SHR does, however, provide a racial breakdown of the actual homicide counts for all offenders between the ages of 10 and 20, as shown in Table 4 and the 5-year period

from 1986 to 1990. African-Americans constituted nearly 61% of all (3,719) adolescents known to have committed murder in 1990. White adolescents made up about 38% of the total. Table 4 also provides evidence of an increase in the rate of involvement in homicide for black 10- to 10-year-olds during their period. For example, in 1986, black offenders constituted only 50.5% of the 2,586 offenders arrested during that year—a much smaller share than the 61% in 1990.

Population-based homicide victimization rates for a portion of the adolescent population described in Table 4 can be found in several recent public health-oriented studies conducted by Lois Fingerhut and her colleagues. In one study, Fingerhut et al. (1992a) studied firearm and non-firearm deaths due to homicide for blacks and whites between the ages of 15 and 19 in the United States between 1979 and 1989. Asian and Native American populations were not included in the analysis. In a second study, the same authors compared changes in death rates among black 1- to 19-year-old males in metropolitan counties between 1983 and 1989 (Fingerhut et al., 1992b).

**Table 4. Homicide Counts by Race – Offenders 10-20 Years Old**

Year	White	African-American	Native American	Asian American
1986	1,224	1,306	27	29
1987	1,138	1,379	32	31
1988	1,090	1,526	21	27
1989	1,236	1,860	21	24
1990	1,409	2,261	21	28

Source: Supplemental Homicide Reports of the Uniform Crime Reports.

Table 5, covering the 1979 to 1989 period, is taken from the 1992a Fingerhut study. The data show the extent of the racial gap in the rate of homicide victimization among 15- to 19-year-olds in the United States during 1989 as well as the difference in rates for different geographic areas. Firearm death rates for black males ranged from 15.5/100,000 for those residing in nonmetropolitan areas to 143.9/100,000 for those residing in the central cities. Comparable rates for white males were 3.0 and 21.5, respectively. Non-firearm rates for males showed a similar geographic and racial pattern, as did rates for females of both races.

The racial disparities and regional patterns for adolescent homicide shown in Tables 4 and 5 largely mirror those found among adults. As discussed earlier, studies conducted since the mid-1900s have shown population-based homicide rates for blacks of all ages to range between six to eight times the rates for whites. These studies, like the data in Table 5, also showed rates of offending and victimization for black females to be higher than those for white males.

**Table 5. Firearm and Non-firearm Homicide Rates by Urbanization Strata Among Persons 15 through 19 Years of Age, 1989\***

Urbanization Strata	<u>Homicide rates per 100,000 population (SE)</u>				
	All**	Black Males	White Males	Black Females	White Females
<u>Firearm Homicide</u>					
Total	11.1 (0.2)	85.3 (2.5)	7.5 (0.3)	8.6 (0.8)	1.7 (0.2)
Metropolitan	13.7 (0.3)	100.9 (3.0)	9.0 (0.4)	10.0 (0.9)	2.0 (0.2)
Core	27.7 (0.8)	143.9 (5.0)	21.5 (1.1)	13.4 (1.5)	3.0 (0.4)
Fringe	4.9 (0.4)	54.0 (5.9)	3.0 (0.5)	5.4 (1.9)	1.0 (0.3)
Medium	7.5 (0.4)	63.1 (4.6)	3.5 (0.5)	7.5 (1.6)	2.0 (0.3)
Small	5.7 (0.6)	48.2 (6.7)	4.3 (0.7)	5.8 (2.4)	1.3 (0.4)
Nonmetropolitan	2.9 (0.3)	15.5 (2.5)	3.0 (0.4)	2.1 (0.9)	1.0 (0.2)
<u>Non-firearm Homicide</u>					
Total	2.4 (0.1)	8.4 (0.8)	1.9 (0.2)	3.1 (0.5)	1.5 (0.1)
Metropolitan	2.6 (0.1)	8.7 (0.9)	2.2 (0.2)	3.4 (0.6)	1.6 (0.2)
Core	4.0 (0.3)	10.4 (1.4)	3.8 (0.5)	4.4 (0.9)	1.9 (0.3)
Fringe	1.9 (0.2)	6.4 (2.0)	1.3 (0.3)	2.7 (1.4)	2.0 (0.4)
Medium	1.9 (0.2)	7.4 (1.6)	1.6 (0.3)	2.4 (0.9)	1.1 (0.3)
Small	1.5 (0.3)	6.5 (2.5)	1.6 (0.7)	1.9 (1.3)	1.5 (0.5)
Nonmetropolitan	1.8 (0.2)	7.1 (1.7)	0.9 (0.2)	1.7 (0.9)	1.3 (0.3)

\*From the Compressed Mortality File of the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control.

\*\*Includes races not show separately.

Source: Table 1, Fingerhut, Ingram & Feldman (1992a: p. 3049).

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What about the rates of deadly violence for adolescents in other ethnic and racial groups? Fingerhut (1994, pp. 19-21) noted that among whites, homicide victimization rates are comparable for Hispanic and non-Hispanic persons under the age of 10, but Hispanic rates tend to be higher for older persons. For 1990, for example, she found that the rates for Hispanic persons between the ages of 15 and 24 were roughly two times the rates for non-Hispanic persons of the same ages. In a study of homicide in Los Angeles between 1970 and 1979 (UCLA and the Centers for Disease Control, 1985), Hispanic males between the ages of 15 and 24 were shown to have a homicide victimization rate of 97.3 per 100,000 as compared to 185.1 for African-Americans and 10.1 for Anglo-whites. Hispanic females in Los Angeles also had rates higher than those for Anglos, but they were considerably lower than those for black females.

These data suggest that the racial and ethnic (Hispanic versus non-Hispanic) profiles for adolescents involved in homicide are not markedly different from those observed for adults. Much higher rates of both victimization and offending are seen for African-Americans and Hispanics when compared to non-Hispanic whites. But, as noted, the lack of data on adolescents prevents a detailed comparison of adolescent homicide rates for other ethnic and racial groups. For example, little is known about the distribution of homicide among adolescents who are Native American or who belong to the diverse ethnic groups that constitute Asian and Hispanic racial categories. Similarly, published data and reports do not permit comparisons of southern white versus nonsouthern white adolescents. But for all of these groups, the rates of deadly violence for adolescents most likely mirror those for the general populations in which they are found.

### **The Ethnic and Racial Patterning of Nonlethal Violence**

Although researchers are likely to agree that ethnic and racial differences exist in rates of murder and manslaughter in the United States, such agreement is less evident concerning differences in nonlethal violent acts (i.e., simple and major assaults, robbery, rape and sexual battery, and threatening behavior). If one assumes that the causal factors that underlie lethal acts of violence are the same as those for nonlethal assaultive behavior, then similar ethnic and racial gaps would be expected for both categories of violent conduct. But some analysts, as will be discussed, appear to be skeptical about the accuracy of such a presumption, suggesting instead that there is little reason to believe that ethnic and racial disparities for acts of nonlethal violence are identical to those shown to exist for homicide. Others have suggested that for the least serious forms of nonlethal aggression, ethnic and racial disparities may not exist at all. These analysts question the extent to which “official” measures of violence crime successfully capture the universe of violent behaviors. Such skepticism is especially evident in studies of nonlethal assaultive behavior.

### **Assaultive Violence, Rape, and Robbery**

Those violent acts labeled by U.S. criminal law as “assault” are the most ubiquitous form of interpersonal violence found in any society. Indeed, nonlethal assaults constitute the majority of the behaviors cited by researchers as justification for describing adolescence as a period of heightened risk for violence. For example, a recent U.S. Department of Justice study (Bastian & Taylor, 1994), in which National Crime Victimization Survey data were analyzed, found that between 1982 and

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1992 more than half of the violent crimes committed against young white males (ages 16 to 24) were simple assaults—crimes that involved no weapon and resulted in little or no injury. The study reported that for young black males, slightly more than 1 in 3 violent crimes during this period were simple assaults. These are the types of conduct that are not reported to law enforcement officials. And, as I discuss later, these are the sort of behaviors used by many researchers to question reported levels of racial disparities for adolescents.

Through the study of both arrest and victimization reports, researchers have begun to develop a profile of those persons involved in the *most serious* acts of assault. Many of the social attributes of persons involved in aggravated assault incidents appear to be similar to those of homicide victims and offenders. The similarities between reported cases of aggravated assault and homicide prompted Dunn (1976, p. 10) to suggest that the data on such assaults, especially those occurring among family members, may represent attempted homicides “nipped in the bud.” Other research has also suggested that the racial, ethnic, gender, and age profiles of aggravated assault victims who are known to the police are similar to those of homicide victims and offenders. For example, Harries (1990, pp. 125-126, citing Langan & Innes, 1985, p. 34) reported that the risk of assault victimization in 1983 was greatest for males, blacks, 16- to 19-year-olds, never-marrieds, and people with incomes of less than \$3,000 per year. This profile came from information provided by the household survey of crime victimization, the National Crime Survey.

Arrest data paint a demographic portrait of perpetrators of assault that is similar to that seen for victims. Table 6 shows the characteristics of persons over 18 arrested for forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and minor assaults during 1991. Table 7 shows the same arrest characteristics for persons under the age of 18. From these tables a racial profile of arrestees for nonlethal acts of interpersonal violence emerges that is not markedly different from that seen for homicide and manslaughter. In addition, the patterns of arrest by race for persons under 18 were almost identical to those for older persons. Blacks made up 41.2% of all persons under 18 arrested for aggravated assault and 34.8% of youths arrested for less serious assaults; the figures for blacks over 18 were 37.8% and 33.0%, respectively. Despite these similarities in the racial profiles of assault and homicide victims and offenders, Dunn (1976) cautioned against assuming the complete equivalency of aggravated assaults with homicide.

Table 7 also provides an indication of the level of racial disproportionality for two other violent behaviors committed by youth—rape and robbery. In 1991 blacks constituted 43.4% of individuals arrested for forcible rape and 60.4% of those arrested for robbery. As with aggravated assaults, little difference is seen in the racial profiles of youth and adults charged with rape and robbery (see Table 6). For many decades, the UCR has indicated similar levels of racial disproportionality for these two offense categories. Among all UCR index crimes, over the years the largest racial gap has been seen for robbery.

**Table 6. Arrests for Forcible Rape, Robbery, Aggravated Assault, and Minor Assaults for Persons Over 18 in 1991**

Offense Charged	Arrests 18 and Older					Percent				
	Total	White	Black	American Indian or Alaskan Native	Asian or Pacific Islander	Total	White	Black	American Indian or Alaskan Native	Asian or Pacific Islander
Total, all	8,807,080	6,031,024	2,604,958	98,555	72,543	100.0	68.5	29.6	1.1	0.8
Forcible rape	25,066	13,707	10,920	238	201	100.0	54.7	43.6	0.9	0.8
Robbery	101,373	38,090	62,123	447	713	100.0	37.6	61.3	0.4	0.7
Aggravated Assaults	312,337	189,025	117,997	2,836	2,479	100.0	60.5	37.8	0.9	0.8
Other Assaults	652,408	423,598	215,443	8,641	4,726	100.0	64.9	33.0	1.3	0.7

Source: Maguire, Pastore, & Flanagan (1993: p. 435, Table 4.9)

**Table 7. Arrests for Forcible Rape, Robbery, Aggravated Assault, and Minor Assaults for Persons Under 18 in 1991**

Offense Charged	Arrests 18 and Older					Percent				
	Total	White	Black	American Indian or Alaskan Native	Asian or Pacific Islander	Total	White	Black	American Indian or Alaskan Native	Asian or Pacific Islander
Total, all	1,709,319	1,220,838	444,341	16,790	27,350	100.0	71.4	26.0	1.0	1.6
Forcible rape	4,701	2,599	2,040	21	41	100.0	55.3	43.4	0.4	0.9
Robbery	34,803	13,127	21,023	153	500	100.0	37.7	60.4	0.4	1.4
Aggravated Assaults	51,913	29,603	21,410	348	552	100.0	57.0	41.2	0.7	1.1
Other Assaults	119,608	74,899	41,678	1,044	1,987	100.0	62.6	34.8	0.9	1.7

Source: Maguire, Pastore, & Flanagan (1993: p. 436, Table 4.9)

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## Interpreting the Findings: Areas of Agreement and Debate

The statistics and interpretations presented thus far appear to paint a portrait of large and irrefutable ethnic, racial, and possibly, class differences in the risk of violent victimization and offending. The data cited by researchers have been derived from death certification statistics, crimes known to the police (obtained from the UCR), victimization surveys (NCS, NCVS), and, to a lesser degree, self-reports of violent behavior. All of these sources of data seem to confirm the belief that substantial racial disparities exist and that such disparities can be found as much among adolescents as among adults. In particular, the disproportionate involvement of African-American adults and adolescents in acts of interpersonal violence appears to be well documented. Some analysts suggest that these findings and those discussed in other reviews and studies present at least a *prima facie* case for establishing a link between race or ethnicity and the etiology of violent behavior. For example, Hindelang (1978, 1981), one of the most widely cited recent analysts of race and crime, concluded that the highest incidence rates for the perpetration of most personal crimes, including acts of interpersonal violence, are observed for black males between the ages of 18 and 20.

More recently, in its summary report, the National Research Council (Reiss & Roth, 1993) used similar data and research studies to make the following observations regarding ethnic and racial disparities in non-age-specific rates of interpersonal violence:

Americans of minority status are at greater risk of victimization by violent crime than those of majority status... Excluding simple assaults from the violent crime rate, the rate of violent crime (forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) for blacks and Hispanics is roughly twice that for whites.

...Blacks, especially black males, are disproportionately the victims of homicide. American Indians and Alaska natives are also at greater risk than are whites, though exact comparisons are lacking. (pp. 69-80)

Blacks are disproportionately represented in all arrests, and more so in those for violent crimes than for property crimes... They are most overrepresented in the most serious violent crimes of homicide, forcible rape, and robbery. Particularly striking is their substantial overrepresentation in the crime of robbery, a crime that is both a person and a property crime...

Other minorities are also overrepresented among all arrestees and among those arrested for violent crimes. Particularly striking is the relatively high representation of American Indians and Alaska natives, especially for aggravated and other assaults, given their proportions in the U.S. population. (p. 71)

As my survey of the literature to this point suggests, these observations and conclusions are far from groundless and have gained much support from a wide range of researchers. But, it has also revealed at least three major areas of discord: (1) questions regarding the adequacy and sufficiency of the “proof” that ethnic and racial groups differ in their rates of *actual* (as opposed to reported)

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involvement in interpersonal violence, (2) debate over the *precise* nature of the *causal or etiological link* between race or ethnicity and interpersonal violence, and (3) disagreement over what can be done to reduce extant levels of disparity. These areas of disagreement are now discussed. These areas of discord are also clearly evident in the 1993 National Research Council report. In the next section of this paper I briefly describe these controversies first as they appear in the general social science literature and then as they apply to the study of adolescents.

### **Ethnic, Racial, and Class Disparities: Areas of Criticism and Caution**

Much of the agreement regarding the extent of ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of interpersonal violence is the result of change that has occurred since the 1970s in the way the incidence of crime and violence is counted and estimated. As noted, researchers now routinely supplement UCR data with that obtained from victimization surveys. And, in the study of adolescent crime and violence, in particular, they have increasingly come to rely also on self-reports. It is on the basis of the seeming agreement across these multiple sources of data that much of the prevailing wisdom regarding class, race, and ethnic differences has emerged. It is also through the use of these competing statistics that areas of discord have emerged.

Hindelang (1978, 1981), whose work has already been noted, studied race differences in crime and violence through the use of arrest, victimization, and self-report data. Using these sources of data, Hindelang concluded that the rate of criminal offending among blacks was substantially higher than among whites during the 1970s. He found that about one-fifth of all robberies were committed by black juveniles (under the age of 18), a group that made up only 2% of the general population. In addition, he estimated from the NCS and UCR data that the annual rate of rape offending for black males between 12 and 17 years old was more than five times that for white males between 1973 and 1976 (1981, pp. 466-467). Further, he reported that racial discrimination and the labeling of individuals did not appear to account for the racial differences. LaFree et al. (1992) and LaFree (1995), looking at black-white crime rates from 1957 to 1988, also concluded that the rate of criminal offending was higher for blacks than for whites and suggested that the improved access to educational and socioeconomic opportunities for blacks during their period did little to narrow the racial gap.

From the work of Hindelang to that of LaFree, and the NRC study, a consensus has gradually emerged among many mainstream researchers that significant race, class, and ethnic differences do exist in the risk of involvement in crime and acts of interpersonal violence. And unlike similar observations made during earlier decades, such differences are not linked to bias or discrimination in the administration of justice (Wilbanks, 1987).

But this emerging consensus has not been without its critics. Such critics have raised two important issues. Some have questioned the degree to which now widely used sources of data agree in their depictions of class, race, and ethnic differences in rates of interpersonal violence. In particular, they have used self-report studies to conclude that group differences are minimal, especially for nonlethal acts of violence. Other critics have questioned, more globally and ideologically, the choice of indexes of violence used in most criminological and public health studies. They have cautioned that

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the nature of the causal and etiological connections among race, class, ethnicity, and violence may depend on the type of violence being measured. Finally, some observers appear to accept the existence of significant ethnic, racial and class differences in rates of interpersonal violence, but challenge prevailing conceptions of the etiology of such disparities.

### **What is Violence? Who is Violent?**

Since this review is limited to studies and data on interpersonal violence, the question of what constitutes violence appears at first glance to be somewhat obvious and redundant. But many critics of the findings reported herein have noted that the way in which violence is defined and measured has many implications for assessing the etiological significance of reports of differing levels of aggression across ethnic, racial, and social class groups. Consider the question posed at the beginning of this paper: Do some racial and ethnic groups in the United States have higher rates of violence than others? Clearly, a review of studies of interpersonal violence alone addresses only part of the query.

In this regard, critics of the studies cited in this review have suggested that most traditional analysts of adolescent and adult violence have utilized a rather limited range of indexes and definitions of violent behavior. Problems of data availability have obviously contributed to this tendency to use selected indexes. Ideological considerations also appear to have played a role. Some forms of violence are less “politically palatable” than others, leading to differences in the willingness or ability of researchers and the public to study or to “control” them. Such insights have led some critics to question whether racial minorities and the poor have rates of involvement in *all* forms and levels of violence that exceed those of whites or members of the middle and upper classes. Critics have also questioned the appropriateness of many of the conclusions that have been drawn on the basis of data showing ethnic, racial and class disparities. As in other areas of research where ethnic and racial differences in behavior or conditions have been observed, many commentators have cautioned against simplistic, ethnocentric, racist, and classiest explanations for these differences.<sup>4</sup>

Pepinsky and Jesilow (1984) are among those critics who have challenged prevailing views of the relationship between social class (and, by implication, ethnicity and race) and violence. They have suggested that to view violence only as state-sanctioned, interpersonal aggression ignores such politically motivated acts of aggression as insurrections, riots, “ethnic cleansings,” genocide, and similar forms of group violence both within and across national boundaries. Such a view, they contend, also ignores those forms of aggression that are sanctioned and carried out under the aegis of legitimate state authority, including war and the punishment of criminal offenders and various “enemies” of the state.

Pepinsky and Jesilow (1984, pp. 58-65) argued further that the narrow emphasis on interpersonal criminal violence has helped to perpetuate the myth that white-collar crime is nonviolent. They proposed that through both commission and omission, white-collar crimes lead to significant injury and loss of life every year in the United States. The recent tendency of U.S. courts to indict corporations and their officials on criminal charges, rather than as violators of civil codes, denotes an increasing awareness of the extent and costs to society of this form of violence. This broader

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conceptualization of what constitutes violence leads to a view of violent behavior as more or less ubiquitous in society, especially in modern industrialized countries. It also implies that the violence of the rich and powerful may be far more pervasive than commonly perceived and that such violence is frequently more deadly than the violent behaviors of the poor and oppressed.

### **Interpersonal Violence as Common Law Crime**

Even if one were to consider as appropriate and acceptable an exclusive focus on interpersonal violence, how that category of behavior is defined is also potentially problematic. Hindelang (1978) noted that most of what is known about racial differences in the rate of involvement in violence has come almost entirely from data derived from legal or law-influenced definitions of interpersonal violence and that these definitions have emanated from the Anglo-American common law tradition. In that tradition, interpersonal violence equals crime. Even among those who advocate public health intervention and prevention approaches, violent behavior is generally measured through the use of indexes that are entirely or partly based on legal criteria. That is, violence is largely conceptualized as those acts of interpersonal aggression that have historically been subject to punishment by the state. As with other criminal acts, legal criteria related to intent, voluntariness, or mitigation are major determinants of the extent of an alleged violent offender's culpability and, implicitly, of who is considered to be a victim. For example, distinctions between aggravated and simple assault, as well as gradations of sexual assault, are based on evidence of actual harm to victims but are also determined by legal judgments regarding the intent of offenders. Only when declared to be legally "wrongful" are acts of violence counted in government reports and accepted as a social problem by the public.

The widespread availability of national crime statistics (through the Uniform Crime Reports) since the 1930s has reinforced the tendency of researchers to equate interpersonal violence with criminal violence. Though criminologists have engaged in a perennial debate over the social scientific sufficiency of common law definitions of crime and whether arrests accurately measure the incidence of *actual* involvement in crime, official crime statistics derived from the Uniform Crime Reports are still widely used to compare ethnic, racial, and class groups.

Pepinsky, Jesilow, and other critics are correct in noting that forms of violence beyond those generally considered by the common law may be worth noting when assessing ethnic, race, and class differences in level of violence. Their critique, however, may have less relevance for comparisons among groups of adolescents than it has for comparisons of adults. For example, as a result of their age alone, the violence in which juveniles and adolescents engage is generally limited to certain social arenas and to rather predictable forms. Even given an expanded definition of family and domestic violence (e.g., violence during dating, parent abuse), adolescents engage in only a small portion of such conduct. Because of their limited access to power and occupations, they commit little violent (broadly defined) white-collar crime. And except as "foot soldiers," they are not generally involved in acts of political violence.

However, it can also be argued that researchers who have an interest in the causes and prevention of youth violence must seriously consider its connectedness to the actions of adults and to more global

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forms of violence. To the extent that crime and violence are an integral part of the U.S. social structure and culture (Merton, 1938; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994), one can expect that the crime and violence of persons in all race, ethnic, and class groups and of all ages will share many common etiological roots. For example, the drug and firearm trafficking in the United States and other parts of the world are major factors contributing to escalating rates of lethal violence among U.S. youth (see, e.g., Blumstein, 1994). Although these activities are controlled and dominated by adults in a multinational setting, they have profound effects on the lives of youth and in their involvement in violence, especially for those who are members of subordinate ethnic and racial minorities.

### **Lethal Versus Nonlethal Violence**

Particularly during the past decade, since the designation of violence as a public health problem, much of the evidence used by the media and public officials to document the “epidemic” of adolescent violence has come from *mortality* data. Only during the past year or so have the Centers for Disease Control begun to compile a registry of data to fully document the incidence of nonlethal acts of violence. Partly because of the absence of reliable data and partly because of the media and public policy appeal of homicide, public health researchers have limited their attention mostly to the study of this form of violence. Though they acknowledge rape, robbery, and assault to be significant and potentially preventable forms of violence, public health analysts have conducted relatively few epidemiologic studies of these acts. One result of this research orientation has been 1) the tendency to equate interpersonal violence with homicide, and 2) a presumption that ethnic, racial and class differences seen for homicide also characterize the social distribution of nonlethal violence.

Even if one accepts that ethnic, racial, and class differences exist in the level of risk for violent death, one cannot necessarily conclude that the same ethnic, racial, and class patterns exist for nonlethal forms of aggression. Since interpersonal violence falls along a legal and public opinion continuum from less to more harmful or serious, all levels and forms of violence must be considered before conclusions can be reached about the true extent of group differences. Some groups may show high rates of some forms of interpersonal violence while displaying relatively low rates of others. Further, some forms of violence (e.g., minor assaults among acquaintances or family) may be more or less ubiquitous and occur with the same relative frequency across ethnic, racial, and class groups. Indeed, the recent report of the National Research Council expressed less confidence in its findings regarding the extent of ethnic and race disparities for *simple* assault than for *aggravated* assault (Reiss & Roth, 1993).

### **Reported Versus Unreported Acts of Interpersonal Violence**

As previously noted, the relative uncertainty about the magnitude of group differences in rates of minor assaults and other forms of nonlethal violence has arisen largely from the unavailability of reliable sources of data. One of the major contributions of the victimization surveys conducted in the United States since the 1970s is the evidence they have provided that every year large numbers of serious acts of interpersonal aggression are never reported to the police. And, to the extent that those acts of violence “missing” from the official record are different from those that are reported, the

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portraits of the racial, ethnic, and class characteristics of victims and perpetrators drawn from the official record are problematic.

How does such potential bias affect the interpretation of findings of group differences in rates of adolescent involvement in interpersonal violence? Critics of those who posit causal or etiological linkages between race, ethnicity, social class, and violence are especially attentive to the potential biases inherent in the problem of undetected or unreported violence. Citing such error, many criminologists who have made significant contributions to the study of race and crime have urged caution in efforts to link race with varying rates of criminal conduct (Mann, 1993; McNeeley & Pope, 1981; Reasons & Kuykendall, 1972; Sellin, 1928; Sutherland, 1934; Wolfgang & Cohen, 1970). Others have urged caution in efforts to link social class and crime, also due in large part to the potentially biasing effects of “missing” data on estimates of group differences (Tittle and Villemez, 1977; Tittle, Villemez & Smith, 1978).

For example, feminist groups have long charged that much of the female battering and child abuse that occurs within middle class and more privileged households in the United States goes unreported. And when these acts are reported, they often do not become a part of the “official record.” Although many of these behaviors among the poor also go unreported, there is a far greater likelihood that such incidents among the poor will become officially reported acts of violence than similar incidents among the more affluent. Since racial minorities such as African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics constitute a disproportionate share of the poor, their rates of reported violence will be higher. Although studies of racial differences in family violence have shown rates of both child abuse and female battering to be quite high among African-Americans (Daniel, Hampton, & Newberger, 1987; Hampton, 1987a, 1987b; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Weis, 1989), more research is needed to know the true extent of the racial differences. Extant studies of class and ethnic or racial differences in the rate of involvement in female and child battering have reported that researchers may exaggerate such differences to the extent that they rely on “official” sources of data (see, e.g., Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Straus et al, 1980).

Much the same line of criticism can be aimed at officially reported data showing racial differences in nondeadly, simple and aggravated assaultive behavior among nonintimates, much of which occurs among adolescents. Unlike lethal forms of aggression, where almost all cases become known to authorities, assaults, particularly those that cause minor injury, are characterized by high rates of nonreporting. Harries (1990, pp. 124-125, citing Harlow, 1985) reported that for 1983, 58% of all assaults (both major and minor) went unreported and that males were less likely than females to report such acts. Significantly, whites and persons with family incomes above \$30,000 were less likely to report assaults than were blacks and those with incomes of less than \$10,000.

Similarly, although Osgood et al. (1989) found self-report and arrest data for juveniles to paint similar portraits of misconduct, assaults were the single area in which there was disagreement between the two methods of data collection. Age differences were found in the likelihood of reporting and detection of assaults. Osgood et al. did not discuss race effects, but the factors they proposed to explain the age differences in reporting may also be linked to racial disparities.

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Since the likelihood of reporting increases with the seriousness of the incident, including the use of a deadly weapon and bodily injury, those assaults labeled by the law as “aggravated” are more likely than minor assaults to be reported to the police. Nevertheless, comparisons of arrest reports and victimization surveys suggest that large numbers of even aggravated assaults go unreported every year (Harries, 1990).

All of the crimes that constitute the FBI’s Violent Crime Index (aggravated assault, rape, and robbery) have been shown to be subject to underreporting and undercounting. Since factors related to the ethnicity, race, and social class of victims and offenders have been shown to affect levels of reporting, critics suggest that there is ample reason to be skeptical of expectations that racial disparities for these forms of violence will mirror those for homicide. If factors related to the race, ethnicity, or class status of victims affect their willingness to report acts of violence, researchers may not be able to develop an accurate profile of “typical” victims and offenders.

Once acts of violence are reported, other factors may influence the accuracy of ethnic, racial, and class profiles of offenders. For example, for many types of crimes, the majority of cases known to the police are not cleared by arrest. During 1991, the number of all aggravated assaults known to the police that were cleared by arrest ranged from a low of 53.7% in cities with population sizes between 50,000 and 99,999 to 66.3% in cities with populations of less than 10,000 (Maguire et al., 1993, p. 451).

According to Maguire et al. (1993; 450-452), the clearance rates for rape and robbery are relatively low (especially in comparison to homicide). For 1991, for example, the percentage of robbery cases cleared by an arrest ranged from a high of 40.3% in rural counties to a low of 25.1% in cities with populations between 50,000 and 99,999. Clearance rates for forcible rape ranged from a high of 56.4% in cities under 10,000 to a low of 48.2% in cities with populations between 50,000 and 99,999.

But, the failure of the police to clear a case does not mean that without an arrest nothing is known about the suspected offender. In many instances of nonlethal aggression, victims have been able to describe some important characteristics of their offenders. In a society in which race (especially black versus white) is as “visible” and salient as it is in the United States, reasonably accurate racial profiles may emerge without an arrest. Ethnic portraits will be less reliable, and probably little will be known about the social class of nonarrestees. But, since many offenders involved in rape, robbery, and assaultive violence are acquaintances of the victims, reasonably accurate ethnic and racial profiles may emerge even when the offender is not immediately apprehended. Of course, even high clearance rates do not compensate for problems of nonreporting of crime and violence.

Criticism of the potential inaccuracy of data purporting to show racial, ethnic, and class differences in less serious forms of interpersonal violence is not a moot point. Some of its relevance may stem from evidence that high rates of lethal violence within a given social group are sometimes but not always predictive of similarly high rates of nonlethal aggression. As an example, cross-national research has shown that the rate of serious assaultive violence in the United States is not significantly higher than those rates found in many other Western nations, particularly when victimization surveys

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rather than police reports are used (Lynch, 1995, pp. 16-17); however, the U.S. homicide rate far surpasses that found in any of those societies (see, e.g., Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1990; Kalish, 1988; and Wolfgang, 1986). Conceivably, therefore, some subgroups in the U.S. may have high rates of serious assaults alongside relatively low rates of homicide, or vice versa.

### **“Missing Data,” Self-Reports and Research on Adolescent Interpersonal Violence**

While accepting the existence of some racial difference, a number of researchers have taken the position that official crime statistics may exaggerate the actual level of racial disproportionality found in adolescent involvement in crime and violence. Much of the basis for their belief has come from studies that involve self-reporting by juveniles of their involvement as offenders in criminal and antisocial conduct. Although many researchers have noted that self-reports of criminal conduct for adolescents do not differ markedly from arrest data (Cohen & Land, 1984; Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Hindelang, 1981; and Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979), others have reported that these two sources of data do not always show substantial or consistent differences between racial groups in their level of involvement in delinquency. Many studies have reported little, if any, racial difference in the rate of adolescent involvement in acts of interpersonal violence (Bachman, O’Malley, & Johnston, 1978; Elliott & Voss, 1974; Epps, 1967; Gold, 1970; Hirschi, 1969; Huizinga & Elliott, 1986; Williams & Gold, 1972).

In response to these findings, a few studies have challenged the conclusions of those who use self-report studies to criticize the racial profiles produced by arrest data on the basis that self-report survey items are dominated by behaviors that usually are less serious than those reported to the police. Thus, when self-report data are used, the criminality of white youth is said to be “inflated” in comparison to that of blacks, who are likely to engage in more serious misconduct. It has also been argued that black youth may underreport their level of actual involvement in crime in self-report surveys (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979, 1981).

In 1980, Elliott and Ageton observed that when comparing self-report and official crime data, researchers must improve their self-report measures and make certain that equally serious behaviors are examined. It appears that researchers have heeded their advice. Many of the methodological defects in self-report surveys seem to have been corrected. Therefore, recent self-report surveys may offer a better estimate of the racial profile of violent adolescent offenders than those surveys conducted during the 1970s. What do these surveys tell us about racial differences? Using data from one such recent survey—the National Youth Survey (NYS), a longitudinal self-report study involving around 1,700 adolescents—Elliott (1994, p.5) calculated the prevalence of serious violent offending across race and age-groups. At the peak age of offending (17), 36% of black males and 25% of non-Hispanic white males reported involvement in one or more serious violent offenses. Elliott observed, however:

Differences in age- and gender-specific prevalence rates for blacks and whites are statistically significant (in most cases) but relatively modest during the adolescent years: the maximum black-to-white differential is 2 to 1 for females and 3 to 2 for males. From ages 19 to 25 (23 for females) the race differential declines, but for both

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genders it increases thereafter to age 27. After the mid-twenties age-specific prevalence rates for black males reverse direction and begin to increase again; by age 27, the male black-to-white differential is again 3 to 2. For females it is nearly 3 to 1. Over the entire life span, the race differential is greater among females than males. (p.5)

These observations suggest that the extent and level of racial differences in rates of involvement in interpersonal violence may vary with age. During the peak years of adolescent violent offending and victimization, blacks and whites may differ less than they do during later years. This is a finding that may have profound implications for prevention and intervention efforts. These observations may also be important for agencies of social control responsible for detecting and sanctioning violent conduct.

If the UCR data presented earlier are reviewed in the light of the criticisms and interpretations noted here, several conclusions appear to be warranted. First, the Uniform Crime Reports have consistently indicated that African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans are substantially overrepresented among those arrested for acts of interpersonal violence in the United States. Second, since the 1970s, the UCR data have been corroborated by data from the National Crime Survey and, to a lesser extent, from studies of self-reported misbehavior. Third, self-report studies have suggested that racial differences in rates of involvement in violence may be smaller than those indicated by the UCR. Further, these differences may be less pronounced for adolescent involvement in nonlethal aggression than for adolescent involvement in homicide. Such studies have also reported that as black and white adolescents age into early adulthood, the black-white gap widens rather than narrows.

All of these observations may have important implications for devising policies aimed at the reduction of violence for all groups and for efforts to narrow the black-white differential. Before exploring that issue, however, it is important to explore a still unsettled question: that of the role played by discrimination and bias in producing the disparities described.

### **Bias in Law Enforcement**

The problems that come to light when contrasting lethal and nonlethal forms of violence and those resulting from nonreporting and nondetection of violent acts provide an obvious opening to pose the question of whether bias in the enforcement of the law significantly affects estimates of ethnic, race, and class differences. As noted, many widely cited recent studies of racial disparities in crime and violence suggest or imply that discrimination and bias in the enforcement of the law do not play a significant role in producing the observed group differences (Hindelang, 1978, 1981; LaFree, 1995; LaFree et al., 1992; Wilbanks, 1987).

In the view of these and numerous other researchers, the soundness of this conclusion has been buttressed by studies that have shown that along a variety of dimensions (areal distribution, age profiles, and stability over time), victimization surveys and official arrest reports (UCR) generally produce consistent findings regarding the nature and incidence of crime in U.S. society (Cohen & Land, 1984; Osgood et al., 1989). And, they are consistent in their reporting of racial differences in

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the rate of violent offending and victimization. The potential for and existence of bias in the administration of juvenile and adult justice are acknowledged by these researchers; however, they challenge the role of bias in producing the kind of racial disparities in rates of lethal and nonlethal violence reported earlier in this paper.

Some observers, however, remain unconvinced that bias in the administration of justice plays only a limited role in producing the racial disparities currently observed in rates of involvement in crime and violence in the United States. Although most acts of interpersonal violence known to the police arise from citizen's complaints rather than the activities of the police, police surveillance and discretion may still be pivotal in shaping "violent crime careers." Recent studies suggest that racial bias in policing and other stages of the criminal justice process may be as much a problem in the late 1980s and 1990s as it was during the 1960s and before (Chambliss, 1994, 1995; Conley, 1994; Pope, 1994; Tonry, 1994; Wordes & Bynum, in press). The aggressive preventive patrols of black ghettos by policy described by the 1968 Kerner Commission report have become as commonplace in the 1990s as they were during the period preceding the riots of the late 1960s. They now take the form of "sweeps" of public housing projects and private residences in search of illicit drugs—procedures that in some instances threaten the civil liberties of black citizens (Rosenbaum, 1993). Many of the more flagrant abuses of police power that were successfully challenged (and believed by some to be eradicated) by advocates of civil rights and civil liberties in the 1960s have become "normalized" by the War on Drugs of the 1980s and 1990s.

The aggressive surveillance tactics that are now commonplace in large and smaller urban areas of the United States arguably do not "artificially" increase the initial rate of overrepresentation of black and other minority youth in minor assaults, robberies, rapes, and other forms of interpersonal violence. However, by attaching a "criminal record" to large numbers of such youth at relatively early ages, police surveillance activities may increase the probability that violence will become a part of the behavioral repertoire of the most economically disadvantaged. For example, Lattimore, Visher, and Linster (1995) reported that neither prior gang affiliation nor heavy alcohol or drug use was a significant predictor of rearrest for violence among youth who committed serious crimes; however, both prior criminal history and socioeconomic variables were significantly related to the likelihood of rearrest. Such observations suggest that even in the 1990s the earlier arguments of labeling and conflict theorists regarding the role of discrimination in producing ethnic, racial, and class disparities in rates of crime and violence cannot be completely discounted (see, e.g., Becker, 1963; Chambliss & Seidman, 1971; Gove, 1980; Lemert, 1972; Quinney, 1970, 1974, 1977).

In addition, aggressive police surveillance of minority communities can be expected to have a more significant impact on the long- and short-term production and widening of a racial gap in rates of violence among adolescents than among adults. Compared to adults of all social classes, youth tend to more frequently engage in potentially law breaking behaviors in public rather than private places. When socioeconomic status is taken into consideration, it is obvious that poor, minority youth are especially vulnerable to social control of the "streets" and tend to develop values, norms, and skills specific to such an environment (Anderson, 1978, 1990). In view of the combination of factors affecting minority youth, ranging from their socioeconomic status, (mal)adaptive "street" norms and values, criminal involvement (whether real or suspected), and "exposure" to aggressive policing, the

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disparities in rates of violence between minority youth and adults and between minority and majority adolescents are comprehensible and predictable.

### **ETHNICITY, RACE, CLASS, AND VIOLENCE: TOWARD PREVENTION POLICIES**

Recently, various governmental and nongovernmental agencies announced plans to devise and implement strategies aimed at the reduction of youth violence in the United States. Their intentions were reported in such documents as the American Psychological Association's 1993 report entitled *Violence and Youth: Psychology's Response*, the 1993 report of the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention entitled *The Prevention of Youth Violence: A Framework for community Action*, and *Healthy People 2000* (1990, chap. 7). Every account of adolescent and adult violence relied upon in preparing these documents noted the higher rate of violence found among ethnic and racial minorities in the United States than among members of the majority. What is the significance of these disparities for the prevention and reduction of interpersonal violence?

As I have noted elsewhere (Hawkins, 1993a), the failure or success of policies and programs aimed at reducing ethnic and racial disparities in rates of violence may depend to a great extent on what policy makers and researchers believe to be the *cause(s)* of the group differences. This observation points, however, to one of the most glaring shortcomings of extant research on class, ethnic, and race disparities in rates of interpersonal violence: Although analysts have consistently documented such group differences, they have offered few explanations for them. Indeed, because of the political and social volatility of such differences, researchers may have intentionally avoided questions of causation and etiology (Hawkins, 1983, 1986, 1990; LaFree, 1995; LaFree et al., 1992).

Hindelang (1981, p. 472) noted the need for researchers to explain the demographic patterning of rates of crime and violence:

The question of what specific mechanisms link particular demographic variables to offensive behavior must be addressed by research beyond the scope of the NCS data. Regardless of what those speculations are, these data strongly support the importance of sex, race, and age in accounting for differences in rates of offending. The strength of these correlations with criminal behavior was anticipated from arrest data...

Sociological theorists must demonstrate their ability to accommodate these associations of demographic variables to incidence rates of offending in "street" crime before their theories can be taken seriously. Theories that cannot should be discounted until they can. (p. 473)

Hindelang's observations reflect an honest attempt to acknowledge the limitations of his data with regard to questions of etiology, but they also point to the failure of past researchers and theorists to offer plausible explanations for the sex, age, and race differences perennially observed in studies of crime and violence. During the decade and more since Hindelang wrote these observations, social scientists have made little progress toward the objectives he outlined. Even the much praised reports

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on violence recently issued by the National Research Council (Reiss & Roth, 1993; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994) are somewhat inattentive to the explanation of race differences.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the four NRC reports and the vast collection of studies they surveyed have identified several plausible ways in which race, ethnicity, class, and interpersonal violence are interrelated. These include two major clusters of etiological perspectives: (a) those that focus on the characteristics of individuals, particularly as perpetrators, and (b) those that focus on social (macro- and micro-level) processes that affect the risk of both victimization and offending. It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey all of these varied approaches and discuss their possible importance for understanding ethnic and racial differences in youth violence. Instead, I turn now to one of the more policy-relevant issues raised in both the NRC reports and the literature they cited—the interrelationships among ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, and interpersonal violence.

### **Linking Race, Ethnicity, and Class: Implications for Public Policy?**

Perhaps one of the most often repeated policy-related conclusions reached by those who acknowledge the existence of ethnic and racial differences in rates of involvement in interpersonal violence is that these differences are *entirely* or *primarily* the result of group differences in levels of socioeconomic well-being. A major premise underlying this observation is that persons of lower socioeconomic status, regardless of race or ethnicity, are more likely to engage in and be victims of violence than are their more privileged counterparts. Both criminological researchers and recent public health analysts have argued for the importance of a causal connection between social class or socioeconomic status and race or ethnicity. For example, in their study advocating public health approaches to violence prevention, Rosenberg and Mercy (1991, p. 33) concluded, “It is difficult to disentangle the contribution of race from socioeconomic status in explaining the high homicide rates among black men, but several studies suggest that socioeconomic status is the more important determinant.”

As I have noted elsewhere (Hawkins, 1995), this stance has been popular among liberal criminological theorists and researchers. It is posed in contradistinction to theories that separate the notion of race from its political, economic, and social moorings and argue that its link to crime, violence, and other social behaviors is through inherent biological or genetic traits that differ across ethnic and racial groups (see, e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). It is also posed in opposition to those who de-emphasize the importance of purely economic factors and instead stress the cultural or subcultural distinctiveness of the poor as compared to the nonpoor (see Hawkins, 1993a, 1995).<sup>6</sup>

But, as the criminological literature and public opinion in the United States attest, this rather straightforward assertion—that crime and violence stem from poverty, inequality, or both—and the public policies it appears to encourage have been the target of much criticism. Like many public policy-oriented positions, it has been opposed from both the ideological “Left” and “Right” and by both policy makers and academics. I suggest that this position and the challenges to it form an integral part of the question of what can be done to reduce current levels of ethnic, racial, and class disparities in rates of adolescent violence.

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## Are the Poor More Violent?

The link between race or ethnicity and interpersonal violence is based on the presumption that the poor and economically deprived are more likely to be involved in acts of crime and violence than are the more privileged. Earlier I noted the extent to which research on the connection between social class, or socioeconomic status, and crime or violence has been hampered by a paucity of data on the socioeconomic status of victims and offenders. But this limitation has not prevented social scientists from addressing the question of whether there is a connection between these social behaviors and SES. Indeed, perhaps the oldest research tradition within the criminological sciences has involved developing theories and conducting empirical investigations aimed at showing that high rates of crime can be attributed to poverty, inequality, or both (see, e.g., reviews of this tradition in Radzinowicz, 1966, pp. 29-42, and Vold & Bernard, 1986, pp. 130-142). Beginning with the work of A.M. Guerry and Adolphe Quetelet, both European and U.S. criminologists have linked the etiology of crime to economic conditions (Bonger, 1916/1967; Braithwaite, 1979; Mann, 1993; Shaw & McKay, 1942/1979; Warner 1941/1963). In addition, numerous tabular and multivariate analyses of the ecological distribution of property crime and criminal violence, both within and across nations, have been conducted to examine potential causal links between poverty, income inequality, unemployment, price and wage inflation or deflation, and varying rates of crime and violence (Avison & Loring, 1986; Blau & Blau, 1982; Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 1980; Crutchfield, Geerken & Gove, 1982; Crutchfield, 1995; Fleischer, 1963, 1966; Gibbs, 1966; Glaser & Rice, 1959; Guttentag, 1968; Hagan, 1989, 1993; Krohn, 1976; Land, McCall, & Cohen, 1990; Messner, 1980, 1982, 1989; Messner & Golden, 1992; Williams, 1984; O'Brien, 1983).

Exploring this connection in a quasi-journalistic study of violence in U.S. society during the late 1970s, Charles Silberman asked:

Why are violent criminals drawn so heavily from the ranks of the poor? The answer lies not in the genes, but in the nature of the lives poor people lead and of the communities in which they reside. The close association of violent crime with urban low-class life is a direct result of the opportunities that are *not* available. Psychological factors may help explain why some individuals turn to street crime and others do not. But the question posed in this paper is not why particular individuals choose a life of crime and violence; it is why the people who make that choice are concentrated more heavily in the lower class than in the middle or working class. (1980, pp. 117-118)

Both in the past and today, however, other researchers have refuted the findings of a significant statistical correlation between measures of economic distress, or inequality, and crime or violence. They have argued that the evidence does not support a conclusion that the poor commit crime or acts of violence at rates higher than members of other socioeconomic groups. Recent statements of this position have been provided by Tittle and Villemez (1977), Tittle et al. (1978), Tittle (1983), Pepinsky and Jesilow (1984), and Reiman (1984).

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Tittle (1983) argued that the widespread belief in greater criminal behavior among the lower class is not a product of compelling theory or convincing empirical evidence. Using self-report data, he and his colleagues challenged the standard profile of criminal offenders as members of the lower class. Reiman (1984) noted that crime is so ubiquitous in U.S. society that it is found across all social class strata. For Reiman, the question is not who commits crime, but who gets punished. All of these authors have argued that the persistence of the belief that criminal behavior is greatest among members of the lower class derives primarily from stereotypes and preconceived notions about the lower class. These images are said to result from efforts by the more privileged to protect their class interests. Both inner- and outer-directed beliefs about class status and behavior are said to serve the purpose of legitimating societal inequality.

These positions have been indirectly supported by the failure of quantitative criminologists to find a statistical correlation between crime rates and differences in various measures of economic well-being, including rates of unemployment, percentage of people living below the poverty level, median income levels, and the like. Vold and Bernard (1986) provided a comprehensive review of studies attempting to find such a correlation, and noted their general failure to do so.

Similar skepticism regarding the link between poverty and violence is evident in the reports of the National Research Council. Reiss and Roth (1993, pp. 70-71, chap. 3), referring to the ten forthcoming, more detailed report by Sampson and Lauritsen (1994), stated:

The net effect of family income is less than that for age, gender, race, and marital status...Its contribution relative to these other factors may be negligible; consequently it remains unclear just how much and in what ways poverty contributes to the risk of violent victimization.

The NRC's stance on this issue was somewhat contradictory, however. Reiss and Roth also cited four studies that indicated that at higher levels of socioeconomic status black-white differences in the risk of homicide victimization tend to disappear. Concerning these findings, they stated: "The interaction described above suggests that socioeconomic status, as measured using some indicator of poverty, is a useful starting point for *understanding and controlling violence* [italics added]" (p.131).

Are the poor more violent? If they are not more violent than the nonpoor, then the widely accepted explanation for ethnic and racial differences in rates of violence with which this discussion was begun is implausible. What should be made of the argument of Tittle and others? Many of the same criticisms aimed at those who have used self-report data to show little racial difference in crime and violence rates have also been aimed at the conclusion of Tittle and his associates, and seemingly of studies reviewed in the NRC reports, that social class and violence are not interrelated. Notable among these challenges is the comprehensive review of studies of social class and crime conducted by Braithwaite (1981), who reported that the conclusions of Tittle and others are in error. Despite these challenges, however, the work suggesting the lack of a significant relationship between economic well-being and violence has struck a responsive chord among many researchers, policy makers, and members of the public.<sup>7</sup>

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It should be evident from much of the discussion in this chapter that I am sympathetic to the arguments presented by Tittle, Reiman, and numerous other conflict and labeling theorists. I believe they are correct to challenge the prevailing ideas regarding the criminality of the poor and the lack of criminality among the more affluent. However, I also believe that Tittle's and Reiman's observations are not inconsistent with those that acknowledge that the "misery" of being poor, oppressed, and members of subordinate minority groups contributes to overinvolvement in crime, violence, and other behaviors that are harmful to the offenders, members of their families and community, and the larger society.

Further, as the reports of the National Research Council also noted, social scientists still have much to learn about the causes of violent behavior. The study of the causal significance of socioeconomic status with regard to violence is a particularly underinvestigated area of research. That the NRC could locate only four studies that have explicitly probed the relationship among race, socioeconomic status, and violence is indicative of the lack of attention to the questions raised in the present review. Such a paucity of studies means that beyond the mere accumulation of incidence rate statistics, little is known about how race and SES are related to either adult or adolescent violence. It may be that carefully crafted etiological analyses of group differences in the rate of adolescent involvement in crimes of violence will reveal more significant associations with SES for those behaviors than have been found in analyses of interpersonal violence for the population as a whole.

Having considered the extant data on adolescent violence, I believe that three sets of conclusions are warranted:

1. Substantial evidence exists that ethnic, racial, and social class groups in the United States differ in their levels of involvement in lethal violence. Such group differences have likely existed for much of the history of the nation, with certain white ethnics of the past having much higher rates of homicide than others. In the United States today, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics are much more likely to be victims and perpetrators of lethal violence than are people of European or Asian ancestry. Substantial evidence also exists to support the accuracy of the belief that higher rates of lethal aggression are found among the economically marginal than among the more economically privileged sectors of *all* ethnic and racial groups. Adolescents in all ethnic, racial, and class groups appear to mirror the levels of lethal aggression found among other age-groups within their populations.
2. The available evidence is inconclusive with regard to whether substantial and significant differences exist in the rate of involvement in nonlethal forms of violence. It may be that many of the less injurious forms of violence are more or less ubiquitous, showing no significant differences in levels of involvement across ethnic, race, or class lines. Conversely, more serious forms of interpersonal violence, such as aggravated assault, and property-related violence, such as robbery, appear to be concentrated more heavily within the lowest social classes and within certain ethnic and racial groups. Given the limitations of official records and the paucity of alternative sources of data, much research remains to be done to document the magnitude of group differences for less serious forms of assaultive violence.

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3. Substantial class, race, and ethnic bias still exists in the way that violence is conceptualized by researchers and the public and in the way that the criminal law is formulated and enforced. Many of the personal harms that result from the behaviors of the more privileged are not taken seriously by those who make and enforce the law. Having acknowledged these biases, however, I believe that interpersonal aggression and violence, especially those acts that lead to death, are disproportionately concentrated among the poor and certain ethnic minorities. Such violence represents a formidable threat to the social and physical well-being of these groups and that of the larger society. Efforts must be made to minimize the effects of class bias in the way that violence is officially treated, but steps must also be taken to understand the causes and reduce the level of interpersonal violence that disproportionately affects minorities and the poor.

### **Toward Policies of Prevention and Remedial Intervention**

Taken either individually or as a group, the assorted studies and sources of data reviewed in this chapter do not provide an incontestable blueprint for devising policies aimed at the overall prevention of adolescent violence or for reducing the ethnic and racial disparities noted. However, I would like to conclude with the following policy-related observations.

1. Though researchers disagree about the precise way to translate findings of ethnic, racial, and class disparities in rates of interpersonal violence into *causal* and *etiological* statements, I am convinced that movement toward that goal is the first step required for devising potentially effective prevention and intervention policies. *Public, governmental, and academic discourse on this subject must move beyond mere documentation of the now reasonably well-established race, ethnic, and class differences to include honest and informative dialogue on the causes of these group disparities.*
2. The years of adolescence are characterized by a unique set of developmental pressures that likely contribute to a higher risk of involvement in crime and violence than is found in other age groups. *However, the presence of ethnic, racial, and class disparities among adolescents that appear to mirror those found among adults in their communities suggests that prevention policies, if they are to be effective, must be both age-specific and aimed at altering the more general causal and etiological risk factors.* For example, efforts to combat gang activity and other youth-oriented sources of misconduct are appropriate, but prevention strategies must also target other conditions found within high-risk communities that affect adults as much as adolescents. *At-risk adolescents come from neighborhoods in which their parents and older neighbors are also at risk for involvement in interpersonal violence.*
3. The acceptance as conclusive of research indicating the lack of a causal or etiological relationship between economic well-being and group disparities in rates of adolescent violence is somewhat premature. Although it is true that *individual* differences, including biological and genetic factors, do affect the level of risk for involvement of adolescents in interpersonal violence, I remain convinced that group differences in access to economic

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resources explain most of the disparity in rates of violence found across ethnic, racial, and class lines.

4. Attempts to remedy or alter other etiological and causal factors known to affect levels of interpersonal violence will be unsuccessful to the extent that their connectedness with economic inequality is misunderstood, ignored, or understated. These other factors include such obvious correlates of violence as gang involvement, drug trafficking, firearm accessibility, dysfunctional families, and ecological or community disorganization and distress.
5. Only those policies that aim for long-term changes in levels of economic, political, and social inequality will substantially reduce current levels of ethnic, racial, and class disparities in rates of adolescent violence.

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## NOTES

1. See, for example, DuBois (1899, 1904); U.S. Immigration Commission (1911); Sutherland (1924, 1934); Sellin (1928, 1938); National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement (1931); Cantor (1931); Brearley (1932); Johnson (1941); Bonger (1943); Henry and Short (1954); Miller (1948); Wolfgang (1958); Pettigrew and Spier (1962); Ferdinand (1967); Wolfgang and Cohen (1970); Davis and Haller (1973); Curtis (1974, 1975); Monkkonen (1975, 1995); Lane (1979, 1986); Silberman (1980); Gurr (1981); and Steinberg (1981).
2. These kinds of comparisons may also be of importance in helping to devise theory and explanations that might guide prevention and intervention efforts for adolescent and adult violence. A number of potentially relevant questions for policy formulation have already emerged from the extant, limited literature. For example, do different cultural values distinguish those groups with low rates of violence as compared to high-rate groups? Are socioeconomic differences more important than cultural values? Are patterns of gun ownership different across these groups? Are these groups distinguished by different patterns of drug and alcohol use and trafficking or by reliance on self-help rather than legal remedies?
3. The recent trend toward studying violence as a public health problem is largely responsible for the tendency to view violence as separate from “crime.” Public health approaches have also led to greater emphasis on victims of violence rather than perpetrators of violence.
4. When asked within the context of the study of interpersonal violence, these kinds of questions are frequently disparaged as representing a kind of leftist, ethnomethodological, philosophical, or excessively intellectual approach. I would contend, however, that such questions are firmly grounded in the traditional, scientific study of crime, law, and justice. Further, even a cursory, comparative survey of social norms or legal codes across societies or within a given society over time will illustrate fluidity and change in definitions of what constitutes “interpersonal” violence. The enormous change during the past several decades in terms of what is thought of as child abuse and of female battering, and in the nature of the laws regulating them, shows the need to take a *reflexive* stance toward definitions of interpersonal violence.
5. I make these observations not to disparage these studies but merely to note the scant attention paid to the question of how to explain the race and ethnic differences noted by the authors. The index for the Reiss and Roth (1993) summary volume indicated that *fewer than 40 of the more than 400 pages* contained discussions of race or ethnic status. Sampson and Lauritsen (1994) devoted several pages to the issue and made reference to it in other sections of their paper, but their discussion, too, was relatively scant considering the overall length of their paper. Given the fact that the authors had to rely on the extant literature, this limited attention is understandable. But it is still somewhat surprising given the size of the racial and ethnic disparities that they reported and the extent of media coverage of urban violence and its racial disproportionality in the 1980s and 1990s. It is also surprising given the tendency of

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mainstream criminologists during recent years to discount the role of racial discrimination in producing race and ethnic differences.

6. The quote by Rosenberg and Mercy (1991) illustrates the tension evident in the social scientific and public health literatures between competing conceptions of race as merely an indicator of socioeconomic status *and* as a measure of other social attributes that may be linked to social behavior. The latter include the “legacy” of slavery, effects of racism and discrimination independent of their influence on economic well-being, distinct cultural traditions found among blacks, and the psychology of subordination. Other researchers, such as Herrnstein and Murray (1994), however, do not consider these “social” differences to fully explain the levels of racial and ethnic disparity found across diverse forms of social behavior in the United States.
7. There is a widespread belief in the United States that individual and group involvement in crime and violence cannot be explained fully by poverty and economic distress. Frequent public statements regarding the extent to which the poor of the past committed fewer crimes than are seen today, the fact that *all* of the poor do not commit crime, and the fact that the privileged sometimes commit heinous acts of violence and are heavily involved in property crime are said to lend support to this line of thought.

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