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JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Race, Ethnicity, and Serious and Violent Juvenile Offending

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Researchers have long observed differences in rates of serious juvenile and adult offending among ethnic and racial groups in the United States. These differences have prompted competing theoretical interpretations and public policy debates. However, conclusions about the racial differences in serious and violent juvenile offending have been reached primarily using individual-level data that, when used alone, yield incomplete results. Multilevel analyses that consider community and contextual factors have the potential to produce a fuller understanding of the meaning of these differences.

This Bulletin first describes the racial distribution of serious and violent offending among juveniles in the United States. It provides a picture of the short-term national trends for offending patterns by race and ethnicity and summarizes research findings on racial and ethnic differences in chronic juvenile offending. Various explanations are given for the racial and ethnic differences observed. The Bulletin includes recommendations for improving understanding of these differences and implications for guiding prevention and intervention efforts.

Sources of Data

Data on serious and violent juvenile offending are primarily of two types: official data from records generated by criminal and juvenile justice agencies and self-report data produced by delinquency and victimization surveys conducted independently of these criminal and juvenile justice agencies. Each source has strengths and weaknesses in the study of racial and ethnic differences in rates of serious offending.

Official Data

Traditionally, arrest data have been used to study differences in rates of offending. The primary weakness of arrest data is that the data are collected only for those criminal and delinquent events that come to the attention of the police and result in an arrest. If ethnic and racial groups differ in their inclination to report crime to the authorities, or if crimes committed by certain groups are more likely to result in an arrest, these factors can bias estimates of racial differences in offending rates. Police themselves may be biased in their arrest policies and may handle offenders differently (e.g., arresting rather than warning) depending on the offender's racial or ethnic background (Hagan and Peterson, 1995; Mann, 1993).

From the Administrator

If we are to successfully address the issue of minority overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system, it is critical to understand the interrelationships among race, ethnicity, and serious and violent juvenile offending and their policy implications.

The data sources that could lead to such understanding, however, evidence deficiencies. The most commonly used data, official crime statistics, are limited by the fact that they represent solely those law-violating activities that result in arrest. The primary limitation of self-report offending data is the small sample size typical of such surveys.

This Bulletin details the strengths and weaknesses of these data sources and describes the findings of alternative data sources, including OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency.

Although researchers have long been aware of racial and ethnic differences in serious and violent juvenile offending, interpreting these variances has been problematic. The Bulletin, however, offers several explanations derived from the research literature.

I hope that the information this Bulletin provides will help reframe the research and policy agenda in a manner that strengthens the juvenile justice system and improves the safety and welfare of all Americans.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator

Race and Ethnicity

The data discussed in this Bulletin rely on race and ethnicity categories defined by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Race is defined as one of five categories—white; black; American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; Asian or Pacific Islander; or other. The term "black" includes African Americans and people of this racial designation whose ancestral origin lies outside the United States (e.g., Haitians). Ethnicity usually indicates a person's country or countries of origin. In most data collections, however, this is limited to the designation Hispanic, which is based on people's identification of themselves as persons of Spanish-speaking origin, although they may be members of any one of the above race groups. This Bulletin focuses on racial rather than ethnic comparisons, because the data contrasting Hispanics and non-Hispanics are limited and lack the consistency needed for comparisons. Similar problems affect the collection of crime data for other racial groups such as Asians and Native Americans.

Other limitations include the fact that official crime statistics are incident based rather than person based. In other words, these data do not provide information about the chronicity of individual offending or the length of time the offender has been involved in crime. Also, while race-specific arrest rates can be calculated from official crime statistics, reliable comparisons of differences within racial groups (e.g., Caribbean blacks versus native U.S. blacks) cannot be drawn because such information is not recorded consistently in police data. Nevertheless, arrest statistics are often used to measure the level of juvenile involvement in crime.

Despite these limitations, several researchers have shown that data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) can be used reliably to assess differences in rates of serious offending (Hindelang, 1978; Gove, Hughes, and Geerken, 1985; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997). In crimes such as robbery and assault, the distribution of arrestees by race has been compared with victims' reports of the perceived race of the offender in order to estimate the extent to which arrest data

might misrepresent involvement in offending. These comparisons suggest that much of the race difference in arrests for violence is due to greater involvement in offending on the part of blacks. In cases of homicide, where victim reports are impossible, arrest data also are believed to accurately reflect race differences in offending because arrests are typically made on the basis of physical evidence and witness reports. It is important to note that most violent crime is intraracial and that blacks are disproportionately the victims of homicide and other forms of violence (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997). But because it is impossible to compare victim reports to arrest data for the majority of crimes in which the victim does not see the offender, conclusions about race differences for other types of offending are difficult to make. Thus, the overall evidence suggests that UCR data in general should be used cautiously and, when possible, should be supplemented with data from other sources.

Self-Report Offending Data

Self-report surveys provide a useful alternative source of data because they eliminate some of the weaknesses inherent in official records. These surveys collect data directly from juveniles who report to researchers about their own conduct, even conduct not detected by authorities. The data provide another view of the overall distribution of crime and delinquency.

The disadvantage of self-report surveys in the study of serious and violent offending is that the sample size is typically too small to generate enough information about serious and violent offenders to assess racial and ethnic differences reliably (Cernkovich, Giordano, and Pugh, 1985). Another disadvantage is that there may be a difference in the validity of self-reports for blacks and whites (Hindelang, 1981; Huizinga and Elliott, 1986). Early studies found that blacks were more likely to underreport serious misconduct, but a more recent study found no racial differences in predictive validity based on these self-reports (Farrington et al., 1996). In addition, with few exceptions, these early studies were based on local rather than national population samples.

Self-Report Victimization Data

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), another alternative to UCR data, is an ongoing survey conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics that measures the

extent of personal and household victimization in the United States. The NCVS provides data about the characteristics of offenders as perceived by victims, regardless of whether the victim reported the crime to the police. Like other data sources, NCVS data have limitations in making racial and ethnic comparisons. As a survey of victims, no data on homicide are provided, no data are collected on the victimization experiences of persons under the age of 12, and victims can only identify an offender's race or ethnicity in crimes involving personal contact. Also, victims of crimes committed by family members or nonstrangers under-report victimization to interviewers. Other limitations include the fact that victims' reports of offender attributes can be difficult to corroborate and that reports of crimes involving multiple offenders do not identify the characteristics of each offender (Laub, 1987).

In summary, the exclusive use of any one source of data can produce an underestimate of the volume of violent crime. None of these sources alone provides sufficient information about the characteristics of offenders and victims and the nature of the violence committed. Data on the social contexts of violence are especially lacking in the UCR and NCVS (Loftin and Mercy, 1995). However, these sources of data can be used in tandem to develop reliable estimates of racial and ethnic differences in serious juvenile offending.

Serious and Violent Offending, by Race and Ethnicity

Official Data¹

Data from the 1998 UCR indicate that differential rates of arrest for crime are related to race (see Snyder, 1999). Arrests of white juveniles (under age 18) constituted 71 percent of all juvenile arrests compared with 26 percent for black youth. American Indian or Alaska Native and Asian or Pacific Islanders account for 1 and 2 percent, respectively (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). Black youth were overrepresented, given the fact that they make up 15 percent of the juvenile population compared with 79 percent white and 5 percent other races. The distribution by index crime type varies, however. Black youth accounted for 42 percent of arrests for violent crime

¹ These data have been updated from the data found in Hawkins, Laub, and Lauritsen, 1998, on which this Bulletin is based.

Explaining Racial and Ethnic Differences

Researchers and criminologists have long been aware of racial and ethnic differences in serious juvenile offending. Interpreting these disparities, however, is another matter; no one theory has adequately addressed the reasons for them (Hawkins, 1993, 1995). Criminologists have not paid enough attention to the extent to which socioeconomic disparity accounts for differences in rates of violence (Hawkins, 1999; Reiss and Roth, 1993), even though they have tended to attribute high rates of crime to economic disadvantages (Tonry, 1995).

These omissions are in part due to reliance on individual-level data to identify those persons most likely to offend. However, individual-centered research is unlikely to improve understanding of the group differences discussed in this Bulletin. It does not take into consideration the larger sociostructural characteristics that distinguish groups and individuals. For example, the developmental life courses of blacks and whites in the United States are affected by their membership in historically distinct social and economic groups. Community-level research can be used to study this larger context and offer great potential in interpreting the meaning of racial and ethnic differences in offending.

The community-level approach asks what it is about community structures and community cultures that produces differential rates of crime across similar and different populations, rather than asking which attributes of individuals and groups lead to criminal involvement. The work of early researchers Shaw and McKay is insightful in this regard (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994, 1997; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Hawkins, 1995). Shaw and McKay (1969) found that:

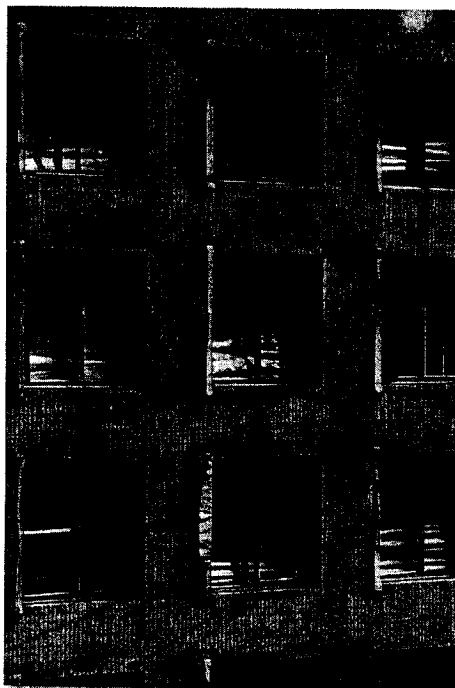
- ◆ High rates of delinquency persisted in certain urban areas regardless of ethnic population composition.
- ◆ Rates of delinquency within racial or ethnic subgroups varied across urban communities.
- ◆ Rates of delinquency did not increase in areas with less crime as ethnic subgroups migrated to such communities.

These findings led Shaw and McKay to focus on the transmission of delinquent behavior through social disorganization and weak social controls rather than individual or group cultural differences.

To examine variation in serious and violent juvenile crime based on these factors, Sampson (1987) disaggregated the 1980 rates of homicide and robbery by race, poverty, family disruption, joblessness, and other factors. The analysis showed that black male joblessness predicted variation in rates of black family disruption, which was significantly related to rates of black murder and robbery, particularly by juveniles. Sampson concluded that this analysis reveals why joblessness and poverty have had weak or inconsistent direct effects on violence rates in past research. These factors in fact exert influence on family disruption, which in turn, directly affects juvenile violence rates.

The percentage of white and black female-headed families was significantly related to white and black violence, although a higher level of family disruption was observed among blacks. In other words, both black and white juvenile violence rates are affected by the same sociostructural factors. The causes of violence appear to be similarly rooted in structural differences across communities and cities, regardless of race. Because of this, it is essential to compare the community contexts within which black and white youth are raised, and to do this, multilevel studies across all racial and ethnic groups are needed.

Blacks often live in communities very different from those of whites (Massey, 1996; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Wilson et al.,



1988). For example, family disruption characterizes the communities in which poor blacks live; relative family stability characterizes those of poor whites. Thus, the interaction between individual traits and neighborhood characteristics must be studied, not just differential rates of crime. In addition, increased urbanization, inequality, and class segregation have had a disproportionate impact on blacks in the past 30 years (Massey, 1996). In 1970, one in five poor blacks lived in high-poverty areas; by 1990, the ratio was slightly more than two out of five (Kasarda, 1993).

The magnitude of the differences under which different groups live suggests that the individual-level correlation between race and serious and violent juvenile offending is a function of ecological conditions. Peeples and Loeber (1994) found that, by controlling for community context (the juvenile's residential neighborhood), racial and ethnic differences in delinquency disappeared. This supports the idea that the association of race and juvenile violence is primarily a function of community context.

These findings also highlight the fact that researchers have not paid enough attention to within-group differences (Hawkins, 1983, 1999), such as those between communities of poor and middle-class blacks. One study that did make such a comparison found that firearm death rates from 1979 to 1989 for black youth 15 to 19 years old varied from 143.9 per 100,000 youth in core areas of large cities to 48.2 in small metropolitan areas, and to 15.5 in nonmetropolitan locations (Fingerhut, Ingram, and Feldman, 1992). Within-group differences may be as large and important to assess as the differences between groups.

Reframing the Research and Policy Agenda

Multilevel research designs and theories that reflect a variety of analytic methods can further the study of serious and violent juvenile crime, especially when attempting to identify and account for ethnic and racial differences. The insights gained from such research have policy-related implications. Public policy aimed at reducing serious and violent juvenile offending should adopt the goal of transforming urban communities, especially in light of past trends in the concentration of urban poverty.

For Further Information

The following publications are available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC). For more information or to order a copy, contact JJC, 800-638-8736 (phone), 301-519-5600 (fax), www.ncjrs.org/puborder (Internet).

◆ **Summaries of the OJJDP Study Group's Final Report.** To help communities and practitioners learn more about serious and violent juvenile offenders, OJJDP has released a series of Bulletins available from JJC that summarize the Study Group's final report (this Bulletin is part of this series):

- ❖ *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders* (May 1998).
- ❖ *School and Community Interventions To Prevent Serious and Violent Offending* (October 1999).
- ❖ *Prevention of Serious and Violent Juvenile Offending* (April 2000).
- ❖ *Effective Intervention for Serious Juvenile Offending* (April 2000).
- ❖ *Predictors of Youth Violence* (April 2000).

◆ **Final Study Group Report.** The Study Group's final report, *Never Too Early, Never Too Late: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions for Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders* (Loeber and Farrington, 1997), is also available (for a fee) from JJC.

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