

Black Males and Violence



Black Males and Violence

Presenter: William Oliver, Ph.D.

Respondent: Richard Majors, Ph.D.

Introduction

In August 1979, *Ebony Magazine* devoted its annual special edition to Black-on-Black crime. This special issue represented a significant milestone and benchmark in African American discourse on major social problems, particularly problems precipitated by numerous structural, cultural and micro-level factors. Seventeen years later in 1995, Black-on-Black violence has emerged as the most significant social problem threatening the survival and quality of life among Blacks since slavery.

In contemporary America, Americans are bombarded with news reports, television documentaries, and films that describe violent behavior among Blacks. The primary goal of this paper is to offer prevention, policy, and research agendas based on the structural-cultural perspective. To establish a context for a discussion of prevention, policy, and research strategies, this paper will briefly review data regarding patterns of prevalence, explain “the causes” of Black-on-Black violence from a structural-cultural perspective, report findings from a major study of violence among Black males, and describe some of the major consequences of the high rate of violence involving Black males.

The Problem

Blacks, a racial minority in America, are disproportionately represented among both violent crime offenders and victims. For example, while Blacks constituted 12 percent of the U.S. population in 1993, in that same year they represented 58 percent of persons arrested for murder, 41 percent arrested for rape, 62 percent arrested for robbery, and 40 percent arrested for aggravated assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994, p. 235). Arrest data also indicate that violent crime, especially murders, involve intraracial victim–offender relationship patterns. For example, in 1993, 94 percent of Black murder victims were killed by Black offenders and 84 percent of White murder victims were killed by White offenders (Department of Justice [DOJ], 1993, p. 17).

In addition, violent crime is typically perpetrated by young males. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reports that in 1993, males were disproportionately represented among persons arrested for murder (91 percent), and aggravated assault (90 percent). Recent reviews of findings regarding persons arrested for murder clearly indicate that fatal criminal violence tends to involve young males. For example, in 1993, 77 percent of persons arrested for murder were between the ages 15 and 34. Regarding the modal age range of murder victims, the FBI reports that in 1993, 48 percent were aged 20 through 34 years (DOJ, 1993, p. 14,17).

Mortality data compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics are another major source of data that describe the prevalence of violence among Blacks. In the most recent statistics available, the National Center for Health Statistics reports that in 1991, death rates for homicide were eight times as high for Black males (72.5 per 100,000) as for White males (9.4 per 100,000) and nearly five times as high for Black females (13.9 per 100,000) as for White females (3.0 per 100,000) (1994).

The age range of 15 to 24 is the most murder prone. For example, in 1991 the death rate for Black males 15 to 24 years of age (159.9 per 100,000) was nine times greater than the rate for similar age White males. (National Center for Health Statistics, 1994).

The most troubling trend in homicide among Black males is the dramatic increase in death due to homicide among young Black males 15 to 19 years of age. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that the percent increases in homicide rates for 1984 through

1987 were greater for adolescent Black males 15 to 19 years (55 percent from 38.5 to 59.6 per 100,000) than for those aged 20 to 24 years (33 percent from 83.3 to 111.1 per 100,000) (1990, p. 869).

Finally, while there is a tendency to focus on violence among young Black males 15 to 24 years of age, it should be noted that older Black males in all age ranges have higher rates of death for homicide than their White counterparts. For example, in 1991, Black males 45 to 54 years of age (50.6 per 100,000) had a homicide rate six times that of White males of similar age (8.7 per 100,000). Also, elderly Black males 65 to 74 years of age (31.2 per 100,000) had a homicide rate nearly eight times that of elderly White males (4.0 per 100,000) (National Center for Health Statistics, 1994).

This brief review indicates that, from the cradle to the grave, Black males have a greater risk of homicide than any other race/sex subgroup. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1985), the lifestyle risk of death by homicide is greatest for Blacks (1 in 21 for Black males and 1 in 104 for Black females) than it is for Whites (1 in 131 for White males and 1 in 369 for White females).

The Structural–Cultural Explanation of Causation

The high rate of violence among Black males has been attributed to numerous factors, including:

- acquired biological causes (such as head injuries) (Bell, 1987);
- alcohol abuse (Harper, 1976);
- social disorganization and inadequate socialization (Frazier, 1949; Moynihan, 1965);
- racial discrimination and displaced aggression (Poussaint, 1983);
- racial discrimination and anger among the underclass (Bernard, 1990);
- adherence to the norms of a subculture of violence (Curtis, 1975; Wolfgang, 1958);

- the cheapening of Black life as a result of criminal justice leniency toward Blacks who commit acts of violence against other Blacks (Hawkins, 1983);
- drug trafficking (Goldstein, 1985);
- gang participation (Taylor 1990); and
- failure to internalize conflict resolution skills (Prothrow–Stith, 1991).

All the scholars cited above, and numerous others not mentioned here, have offered responses to the question: What causes the high rates of violence among Black males?

A major weakness inherent in most of these causal perspectives is that they tend to focus on a single factor as “the cause” (e.g., poverty, racism, drugs, or gangs). In addition, most traditional causal perspectives fail to describe how broad social conditions precipitate interpersonal encounters that culminate in violence. Racial discrimination and poverty are powerful social forces, but how do they translate into values, norms, role orientations, and lifestyles that precipitate and/or facilitate violent confrontations?

Given the criticism of traditional perspectives on violent crime causation among Blacks, to fully understand “the causes” of the high rates of violence among Black males, researchers must consider how various structural and cultural factors converge to produce a social context in which the occurrence of violent confrontations constitutes a routine feature of social interaction.

An adequate theoretical explanation of violence among Blacks must address the disproportionate involvement of Black males as both perpetrators and victims of violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1990). The most fundamental assumption and claim of the structural–cultural perspective is that the high rates of interpersonal violence involving Black males are a direct result of the convergence of structural pressures and dysfunctional adaptations to those pressures. Basically, the structural–cultural argument assumes that structural conditions inherent in the social organization of American society pose an extraordinary challenge to Blacks with regard to their ability to survive and achieve a quality of life that leads to social stability.

There exist two distinct structural pressures that influence and contribute to how Blacks, as a group, culturally adapt to American society. The first structural pressure is institutional racism, the systematic deprivation of equal access to legitimate opportunities in the form of education,

vocational training, and employment (Oliver, 1994). The historical legacy of institutional racism begins with 246 years of slavery (1619–1865) followed by nearly one hundred years of Jim Crow Segregation (1865–1964) (Knowles and Prewitt, 1969). The impact of the history of racial discrimination in the United States has been that of handicapping Blacks in the pursuit of political and economic freedom. Consequently, unemployment, poverty, and stress are inherent in the social experiences and evolution of African Americans. In addition, historical patterns of racial discrimination establish an adaptation context or environmental context conducive to the emergence of positive and negative cultural adaptations (Blassingame, 1972). In sum, institutional racism has been a major source of pressure for African Americans (Madhubuti, 1990).

What many social scientists fail to consider when addressing social problems among Blacks is that racism is more than its institutional manifestation. Racism is also a cultural practice and therefore it is important that we consider the role of cultural racism in the sequence of factors that contribute to violence among Blacks. Cultural racism is defined here as the systematic way in which the White majority has established its core cultural institutions (i.e., the educational system, religion, and various forms of mass media) to elevate and glorify European physical characteristics, character and achievement and denigrate the physical characteristics, character, and achievement of Blacks and other non-White people. The most dramatic example of this cultural practice is evident in the conspicuous absence of Blacks in the social studies curricula of most elementary and secondary schools. The consequence of this practice is the emergence of a generalized superiority complex among White Americans and a corresponding inferiority complex, or perception of one group as less significant than the White majority, among Blacks (Welsing, 1991).

Structural pressures in and of themselves are not enough to explain the high rates of violence involving Black males. Thus, this perspective asserts that to fully explain and comprehend violence among Black males, it is essential to consider specific cultural adaptations to racism. Thus, the position argued here is that dysfunctional cultural adaptations to White racism lead to the emergence of values, norms, role orientation, and lifestyle practices that increase the risk of violence participation.

There are two dysfunctional cultural adaptations that appear to be most relevant in explaining the high rates of violence in the African American community. The first is the failure of the

Black community to include, as part of their group struggle against racism, strategies to overcome the effects of cultural racism. Cultural racism operates to distort the group's consciousness and cultural confidence, leading subsequently to cultural incompetence as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is impossible for a group to value itself or overcome powerful structural pressures if that group does not directly challenge and engage in practices to overcome efforts to distort their cultural image and legacy (Karenga, 1990).

In addition to the failure to develop an ideological position to counteract the effects of cultural racism, the inability to control the process in which large numbers of Black males make the passage from boyhood to manhood is exceptionally problematic. After 1965, Blacks lost the ability to socialize large segments of the Black male population, which hampered the ability of Black males to commit themselves to values and norms that promote self discipline and social stability. This loss of control over the socialization of many young Black males is consistent with a number of social trends. First, during the late 1960's, an advantaged class of Blacks emerged. As a result of the dismantling of institutional racism through various civil rights acts, these Blacks were able to "move up and away" from poor, unskilled Black communities (Wilson, 1978).

A second factor is an ever increasing rate of joblessness among Black men as a result of major transformations in the economy. That is, the American economy has changed from low skill, high wage industrial manufacturing to a dual sector economy comprised of low wage service employment and high wage managerial or technology oriented positions that require advanced training (Wilson, 1978). A direct result of the high rates of joblessness among Black males is the increase in female headed families. In 1992, nearly 50 percent of Black families were headed by a female and 68 percent of live births among Blacks were born to unwed mothers (National Center for Health Statistics, 1994, p. 14).

A third factor is the emergence of crack cocaine trafficking as an increasingly acceptable alternative means of acquiring money, material goods, and social status (Lusane, 1990). Subsequently it is becoming much more difficult to encourage low income Black males who are not succeeding in the educational system to pursue low wage employment.

A fourth factor is the dual emergence of street gangs and "gansta rap." Street gangs often surface in environments where the family is fractured. Clearly, in the Black community, the

family as an institution of social control is fractured when 1 in 4 Black babies is born to a teenager, and 68 percent of Black babies are born to unwed mothers (National Center for Health Statistics, 1994). Furthermore, for the first time in history, African Americans have produced a youth oriented music, “gansta rap,” that encourages sexual exploitation of females and the use of violence to resolve disputes (Fernando, 1994).

The Violent Social World of Black Men

Although in recent years much has been written about the high rates of interpersonal violence among Black males, very little is known about how Black males justify their participation in violent confrontations. A brief review of major findings derived from a study to gain insight into how violent Black men justify resorting to violence in conflict ridden situations follows (Oliver, 1994). The findings discussed are based on focused interviews with 41 Black males who were involved in 116 violent confrontations.

A major focus of the study was to gain an insider–specific perspective on the causes of violent confrontations among Black males. In response to the question, “What causes violence in the streets?” the individuals interviewed offered the following responses:

- drugs and trying to get over on other people;
- women and romantic competition;
- unemployment and economic jealousy;
- disrespect; and
- alcohol intoxication.

The interview schedule was designed to tap the respondent’s description of precipitating events that served as a catalyst for the sequence of events culminating in violence. For example, respondents tended to report that the violent confrontations in which they were directly involved began as a result of their antagonist engaging in behavior that was defined as:

- loud talking and getting bad,
- insults and identity attacks, and

- disrespect.

Illustrative of how disrespect may precipitate a violent confrontation, my respondent Lee describes a situation in which his sister and girlfriend asked him to speak to a man who refused to stop pursuing a conversation with them after they indicated they were not interested in any romantic oriented conversation.

Lee 1: He was chumping me off. He was putting me in a position where he was telling me I didn't have no right to be there for my sister, my woman, or myself.

I: So when you got outside, what happened?

Lee 1: We commenced to fighting.

I: Did he violate any rules of behavior?

Lee 1: When he loud-talked me, he totally disrespected me. He was through, then...that was a fight then. There was no way he could get around it.

I: Why was that crossing the line? Why was that the straw that broke the camel's back?

Lee 1: Young Black men, here and a lot of other places that I have been, we just don't accept being disrespected. Not only by our friends and family but especially by strangers.

How third parties contribute to violent confrontations was also explored. The rationale for asking respondents about the role of third parties was based on the observation that violent confrontations between Black males tend to occur in various street corner settings (e.g., street corners, bars, drug houses, and other hangouts associated with "the streets").

Respondents tended to describe third parties as mediators, instigators, and the instigating audience. Generally, mediators and instigators had a primary relationship with one of the combatants: they tended to be related or close friends. Exceptions included a mediator who had an occupational duty--as a bar owner, bartender, bouncer, or law enforcement officer-- to

intervene in violence-prone arguments or actual physical assaults.

The most significant findings regarding the contribution of third parties involved “the instigating audience.” The term instigating audience was coined to refer to respondents’ descriptions of bystanders who encouraged one or both participants in a conflict-ridden situation to resort to violence as a means of resolving interpersonal conflict (Oliver, 1994, p. 103). Respondents consistently reported that it was common for individuals in “the streets” to encourage others to fight when they observed verbal conflict. For example, the following respondent reports:

Hicks: You get feedback from the crowd... “Hey man, don’t let that sucker chop you off like that.” Now this is motivating your anger. And you look and you want to walk away, but you got to prove to them that you are all man.

The decision to use violence in a conflict-ridden situation is an important aspect of the dynamics of violent confrontations. The respondents that I interviewed relied on one of four justifications to explain their decisions to resort to violence. These justifications included disrespect—the ultimate rule violation, self defense, alcohol intoxication, and violence as a means of communication (Oliver, 1994, p. 105–113).

Summary of Study

A significant theme in the accounts of the men interviewed was that, as a group, they were overtly sensitive to actions that they define as disrespectful. More specifically, violent Black men tend to view disrespectful acts as a threat to their sense of manhood. In the cultural context in which they have constructed gender identity, it is expected that a real man must defend his manhood against those who seek to damage it through insults, identity attacks, or actual physical confrontations.

Consequences of Violence

There are several major consequences of violence among Black males. Foremost is the early loss of life. The early loss of life is tragic and affects the social stability of the Black community. Moreover, it substantially distorts the male–female sex ratio and the potential to establish male–female relationships that lead to marriage (Madhubuti, 1990).

Second, high rates of violence contribute to the high rate of incarceration among Black males. According to a survey conducted by the Sentencing Project in Washington DC, one in four Black males between 20 and 29 years of age is in jail, prison, or under community supervision. Moreover, there are more Black males between 20 and 29 years of age who are incarcerated (609,000) than the total number of Black males of all ages who are enrolled in college and universities (439,000) (Mauer, 1990).

Third, fear of Blacks among Blacks has emerged as a routine feature of living in the inner city. Fear of Blacks by Blacks is not conducive to the development of the type of social unity and stability that is necessary to overcome racism.

Fourth, an increasing number of Black youth are carrying weapons out of a need for protection or as a result of being threatened or having internalized a sense of fear as a result of living in domestic war zones (Bell & Jenkins, 1991; Issacs, 1992).

Prevention, Policy, and Research

The problem of Black male violence did not emerge as an innate cultural predisposition of Black people. A convergence of structural pressures and dysfunctional adaptations are directly responsible for the high rates of violence. In response to the high rate of violence, this author offers the following prevention strategies:

- Blacks must claim ownership of Black–on–Black violence, define it as real, and define it as ours to solve with community based institutions and organizations. Every church and civic organization must have, as part of its contemporary mission, the reduction of violence among Black people.

- Researchers and practitioners should encourage the formation of community based coalitions to establish and implement anti–violence programs. Violence prevention on the community level should include recreation programs used as a hook or inducement to expose at–risk youth to conflict resolution and mentoring programs (Prothrow–Stith, 1991; Oliver, 1994).
- Black organizations must network with local politicians and law enforcement to employ a comprehensive community policing program. Collaborative problem solving of problems associated with delinquency and adult criminal behavior is a first step in a community wide approach to reducing violence and other crime in African American communities.
- The federal government should be encouraged to support a total ban on hand gun ownership as handguns are the primary means used to commit most homicides involving Black males (DOJ, 1993).

The Research Agenda

Currently, we know a great deal about the race, sex, and age characteristics of Black violent crime offenders and victims, but we know very little about the life course and important turning points in the lives of violent Black men (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1990). Therefore, one area of study that should be pursued immediately is life histories that focus on background and important turning points in the lives of Black men who have engaged in acts of interpersonal violence. In addition, it would be helpful to conduct research in which the “good boys” who live in highly violent neighborhoods are compared to the officially defined “bad boys” to determine the differences in background experiences and/or personality that may account for differential involvement in violent incidents.

Also, we need more studies that examine the interpersonal dynamics of violent confrontations among Black males. That is, moving beyond social conditions: How do violent incidents evolve? How do routine activities associated with lifestyle contribute to violent confrontations?

REFERENCES

- Bell, C. (1987). Coma and the etiology of violence, Part 2. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 78, 79–85.
- Bell, C., & Jenkins, E. (1991). Traumatic stress and children. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 2, 175–185.
- Bernard, T. J. (1990). Angry aggression among the truly disadvantaged. *Criminology*, 28, 73–96.
- Blassingame, J. (1972). *The Slave Community*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1990). *Black Victims*. Washington, DC: Department of Justice.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1994). *Guns and Crime*. Washington, DC: Department of Justice.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1985). *The Risk of Violent Crime*. Washington, DC: Department of Justice.
- Centers for Disease Control. (1990). Homicide among young Black males—United States, 1978–1987. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 39(48), 869–873.
- Curtis, L. A. (1975). *Violence, Race, and Culture*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books.
- Department of Justice. (1993). *Crime in the United States*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Fernando, S. H. (1994). *The New Beats—Exploring Music, Culture, and Attitude of Hip-Hop*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Frazier, E. F. (1949). *The Negro Family in the United States*. New York: Macmillan.
- Goldstein, P. J. (1985). The drugs/violence nexus: A tripartite conceptual framework. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 14, 493–506.
- Harper, F. (1976). Alcohol and crime in Black America. In F. Harper (Ed.), *Alcohol Abuse and Black Americans* (pp. 129–140). Alexandria, Virginia: Douglas Publisher.
- Hawkins, D. F. (1983). Black and White homicide differentials—alternatives to an

adequate theory. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 10, 407–440.

Issacs, M. R. (1992). *Violence: The Impact of Community Violence on African American Children and Families*. Arlington, Virginia: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.

Karenga, M. (1990). *Introduction to Black Studies*. Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press.

Knowles, L. L., & Prewitt, K. (Eds.). (1969). *Institutional Racism in America*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice–Hall.

Lusane, C. (1990). *Pipe Dream Blues—Racism and the War on Drugs*. Boston: Southend Press.

Madhubuti, H. R. (1990). *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, and Dangerous?* Chicago: Third World Press.

Mauer, M. (1990). *Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: A Growing National Problem*. Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project.

Moynihan, D.P. (1965). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

National Center for Health Statistics. (1994). *Health United States—1993*. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services.

Oliver, W. (1994). *The Violent Social World of Black Men*. New York: Lexington Books.

Poussaint, A. F. (1983). Black on Black Homicide: A psychological perspective. *Victimology*, 8, 161–169.

Prothrow–Stith, D. (1991). *Deadly Consequences*. New York: Harper Collins.

Staff. (1978, August). Black on Black Crime. *Ebony*, pp. 6–14.

Taylor, C. (1990). *Dangerous Society*. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press.

Welsing, F. C. (1991). *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Color*. Chicago: Third World Press.

Wilson, W. J. (1978). *The Declining Significance of Race*. Chicago: University of

Chicago Press.

Wolfgang, M.F. (1958). *Patterns of Criminal Homicide*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Response:

Richard Majors

Dr. Oliver has taken Black violence research, especially among Black males, to a highly evolved level. Although African American scholars have done an excellent job analyzing and interpreting violence research, there are still some methodological shortcomings. That is to say, most of the current research that examines interpersonal violence focuses on sociodemographic characteristics of violent offenders and their victims. To adequately deal with these shortcomings, Dr. Oliver advocates the use of life histories and in-depth interviews as methodological tools to both enhance our knowledge and advance the study of interpersonal violence of Black males.

As Dr. Richie argued in her paper, *Gender Entrapment: When Battered Black Women are Compelled to Crime*, the use of life histories and in-depth interviews should be an integral part of serious social science research. Specifically, life histories and in-depth interviews uncover how violent Black males define and account for violence in their lives. Moreover, life histories and in-depth interviews examine the subjective realities, feelings, motives, thoughts and perceptions of individuals who are involved in violence.

Dr. Oliver's research also has had a major influence on helping us to understand how dysfunctional masculine roles and norms lead to violence among Black males. Dr. Oliver uses the term compulsive masculine alternative to describe the unique way in which many lower social economic status Black males demonstrate masculinity. According to Dr. Oliver, the compulsive masculine alternative is a dysfunctional cultural adaptation because the compulsive masculine alternative emphasizes values and norms (e.g., toughness) that lead to violence among Black males. Historically, our society has not provided Black males with legitimate channels or resources to demonstrate their masculinity and be treated with respect. Therefore, Oliver argues that Black males have redefined manhood to compensate for feelings of shame, guilt, powerlessness, and a lack of self-esteem. Thus, for many Black males, violence is viewed as the only tool available for achieving respect, status, and power.

Dr. Oliver writes in his book, *The Violent Social World of Black Men*, that Afrocentric

socialization models and manhood training programs in the Black community are very important paradigms because they attempt to inculcate positive masculine roles and values. Various organizations and institutions have sponsored intervention and prevention programs for delinquent and emotionally troubled Black youths who experience a lack of impulse control and show exaggerated forms of masculinity. These programs provide impulse management, life skills, social skills, values and vocational training, placement, remedial education, and counseling.

Dr. Oliver argues that the failure of Blacks, especially Black males, to adopt an Afrocentric cultural ideology or world view has made them vulnerable to and unable to mitigate against societal problems (e.g., racism, discrimination, violence, self-destructive behaviors).

As we move towards the 21st century it is important that we use methodological tools such as life histories and in-depth interviews to help advance the study and understanding of interpersonal violence among African American men. Such tools are invaluable as we move to solve one of society's greatest problems—violence in America.