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P A R T I

Homicide Studies

Homicide Risk and Level of Victimization in Two Concentrated Poverty Enclaves: A Black/Hispanic Comparison

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Introduction

Regardless of race or ethnic status, victims of homicide in the United States are drawn most often from the lower socioeconomic classes. More recently, however, a growing number of researchers have begun to focus attention on the context and/or environment in which homicide within the lower socioeconomic classes occurs (See Morenoff and Sampson, 1997; Almgren and others, 1998; Krivo and Peterson, 1996). More often than not, this means focusing attention on urban neighborhoods described as economically disadvantaged or as neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Massey, 1995). The current focus on concentrated poverty neighborhoods as a primary environment of concentrated homicide victimization is partially an outgrowth of interest in the phenomena described as the underclass. Underclass research had its origins in work done in the 1980s (see Glasgow, 1980; Murray, 1984; Wilson, 1987; Auletta, 1981).

The validity of the concept of the existence of an urban underclass in the United States and its various definitions have been severely criticized, and is not universally accepted among academic researchers. In this instance, we focus our attention on two sets of urban neighborhoods that satisfy the definition of extreme poverty neighborhoods, that is, 40 percent poor, in a single large Midwestern urban center. It is in neighborhoods that transcend this poverty threshold that homicide victimization rates are usually highest. It is in neighborhoods like these that researchers have identified a number of critical dimensions that are thought to lead to elevated homicide risk (see Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). Thus, our focus on neighborhoods of concentrated poverty is designed to help us better understand variations in homicide risk levels among two minority populations,

blacks and Hispanics, during the 1989–93 interval, residing in a single urban center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The 1989–93 interval generally coincides with the most recent upsurge in urban homicide in the United States. In viewing these two residential clusters as environments of elevated homicide risk, our approach will place primary emphasis on victimization rather than offending. We do look, however, at the offending practices of youth and young adults in these settings. The victimization approach employed in this paper reflects the demographic perspective of the authors.¹

We also must note the importance of studying homicide as a way of estimating the extent of actual racial and ethnic differences in crime and victimization. Of all violent crime statistics, homicide statistics are the least biased, meaning that they are far more accurate than other violent crime statistics. All of the other crime statistics rely on victim reporting to the police and police agencies reporting to a host of local, state, and federal agencies. If a victim does not report a crime, it is not counted. Or, even if reported, police agencies for a variety of reasons may not report it to the various data collection agencies. Thus, we know that these crime statistics are biased in a number of ways and do not reflect the actual levels of violent crime. Homicide statistics, by contrast, do not rely on self-reported data but result from one source – the discovery of a body. As such, the bias in homicide statistics is minimal. Therefore, homicide studies are a good way to begin a volume on racial and ethnic differences in crime.

Concentrated Poverty Neighborhoods: Environments of Violent Victimization

We assume that the growth of concentrated poverty neighborhoods is a reflection of local level effects of the globalization of the economy, and the social and economic polarization thought to accompany it, such as the loss of limited skill jobs, the growth of low-paying jobs, and, among others, the relocation of jobs from the central city to the suburbs (Wilson, 1987, 1996; Massey and Denton, 1995; Kasarda, 1993). Those most negatively affected by these changes find themselves in close contact with others who also have been negatively affected by economic change. Wilson (1987), in describing the changes taking place in Chicago's black community, suggests that more successful blacks are able to abandon these communities, and, as a result, leave behind a residual population with only limited resources with which to alter its status, at least through employment in the legitimate economy.

¹ In this instance, homicide is primarily viewed as a cause of death rather than a criminal offense. Researchers adopting an offender perspective most often represent a criminological orientation.

The question becomes – Does the growth in the number of extreme poverty neighborhoods lead to an escalation in levels of lethal violence as some writers suggest (see Anderson, 1999)? If so, does the risk of victimization vary across race/ethnicity and gender? Furthermore, does the structure of victimization in extreme poverty neighborhoods differ from that in nonconcentrated poverty neighborhoods? These are the questions that are central to the research presented in this chapter.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin: A Temporary Target of Economic Dislocation

Milwaukee, a midsized American manufacturing belt city with a historical reputation as a prosperous working-class center (Hamilton, 1972), saw that reputation diminish as an outgrowth of the loss of manufacturing jobs between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s. By the end of the 1980s, however, the city had experienced a remarkable economic recovery. Despite the recovery, its black population was left behind as black male joblessness continued at a high level. Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty rapidly expanded in the city's black community. By 1990, more than half of the city's black neighborhoods could be described as extreme poverty neighborhoods. Yet, this pattern was not confined to the city's black community, as concentrated poverty neighborhoods were also prevalent in the city's substantially smaller Hispanic community.

In 1990, Milwaukee had a total population of 628,000, of which 190,000 or 30.2 percent were black, and 40,000 or 6.4 percent were Hispanic. A disproportionate share of both groups was housed in concentrated poverty neighborhoods. These were neighborhoods in which drug and gang activity were most pervasive. Given the vagaries present in the two clusters under review, one might conclude that we should expect them to be among the most violent in the city.

The black population in Milwaukee is almost five times as large as its Hispanic counterpart. Nevertheless, we believe it important to measure the extent to which the two groups have been involved in the upsurge in homicide victimization that began locally in 1989. Milwaukee, like a number of large American cities, experienced a rapid increase in victimization levels beginning in the middle to late 1980s that finally leveled off in the early to mid-1990s. Being classified among the growing number of cities where homicide levels had reached all time highs was a new experience for Milwaukee.

Historically, urban homicide in the United States reached its highest levels in those large American cities that were primary targets of black migration beginning during World War I and ending prior to 1970. A number of those places experienced an upsurge in levels of victimization between

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1965 and 1975, an interval that was characterized by an earlier drug epidemic. By 1990, several large American cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami, were the places of residence with growing black and Hispanic populations, a sizable share of whom were poor. These also were places in which new rounds of violence occurred leading to unprecedented levels of homicide. In such centers, drug and/or gang activity was increasing. These activities are often assumed to be associated with the expansion of zones of concentrated poverty. It is in these zones that employment in the mainstream economy is low and employment in the illicit economy is where youth and young adult males frequently turn for economic support (see Wilson, 1996).

The Microspatial Targets of Investigation

Differences in population size between the two populations suggest that they would contribute differentially to the level of observed victimization from 1989 to 1993. In each of the years, blacks accounted for the single largest number of victims. By the end of the period, black victimizations hovered around 80 percent of the total. Yet, Hispanic victimizations were also increasing, but at a much slower rate. What we are primarily concerned with, in this instance however, is how these two populations, residing in a set of similarly situated neighborhoods, were differentially engaged in behaviors leading to fatal victimizations. In effect, we are attempting to isolate indirectly an environmental influence on risk of victimization in two ethnic residential clusters.

In order to give equal attention to these two populations at risk, we focus on homicides occurring in two sets of eleven neighborhoods. In one set of neighborhoods, blacks represent the predominant population, and in the other, Hispanics represent the predominant or subpredominant population (see Figure 1.1). In both instances, a group of contiguous concentrated poverty neighborhoods have been chosen as target neighborhoods. Thus, we are attempting to detect differences in levels and risk of victimization in two distinct race/ethnic populations. It should be noted, however, that there are more than forty black concentrated poverty neighborhoods in the city and we have chosen to direct our attention to only eleven. By contrast, the eleven target Hispanic neighborhoods represent the only neighborhoods in the city in which the Hispanic population was in the majority or near majority in 1990.

Differences Among the Target Neighborhoods. The neighborhood clusters possess similarities across a number of important social variables, but they differ on a number of dimensions as well. The most obvious differences are in levels of segregation and the presence of persons from abroad.

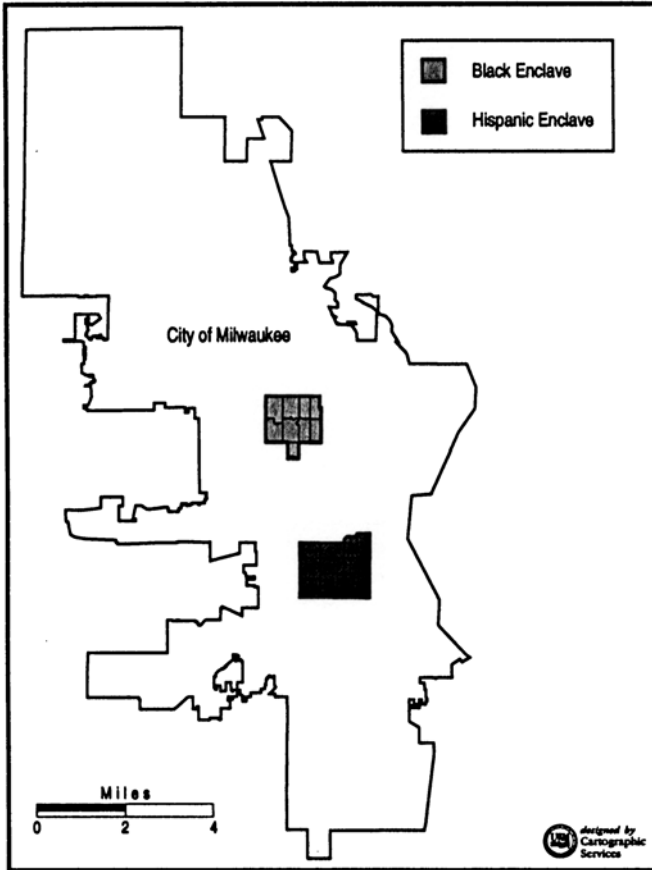


Figure 1.1. Black and Hispanic Study Neighborhoods

Blacks are much more intensely segregated in the study neighborhoods than are Hispanics. In no instance do Hispanics constitute more than two-thirds of the neighborhood population, and in several instances hover around only two-fifths of the population. In none of the observed neighborhoods do blacks constitute less than 90 percent of the total. Massey (1995) has suggested that it is at the intersection of poverty and segregation that the potential for lethal violence reaches its peak.

One final distinction that differentiates these two neighborhood clusters is the prevalence of households headed by females. Among Hispanic households, 26.6 percent are headed by females, whereas in the black neighborhoods more than three-quarters of all households are female-headed. A number of homicide researchers associate high levels of female-headed

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households with weakened informal social control that results in increases in levels of violence among youth (Sampson, 1987; Ousey, 1999; Phillips, 1999).

During the most recent intervals in which homicides peaked in the United States, 1965–75 and 1985–95, blacks constituted the primary victims and offenders. As a result of the high levels of black involvement in lethal violence nationally, some researchers have described black males as practitioners of a subculture of violence (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). Nonetheless, not all researchers agree. Some have rejected outright the categorization of black males as practitioners of a subculture of violence as an adequate explanation for the rise and fall of homicide peaking patterns (see Cao, Adams, and Jensen, 1997). That distinction aside, blacks have experienced the highest homicide risk levels of any race/ethnic population in the United States since homicide statistics were first recorded. Even so, after controlling for race, homicide rates vary substantially across place (Peterson and Krivo, 1993).

Why So Few Comparisons of Levels of Black and Hispanic Victimization?

Research on the recent upturn in urban homicide risk levels has focused almost exclusively on killings taking place in the nation's larger black communities. Little attention, until recently, has been focused on Hispanic victimizations, even though they constitute a significant urban population residing in expansive barrios in a growing number of urban centers. One reason, no doubt, for the failure to devote attention to Hispanic victimization is related to data quality and the absence of Hispanic scholars with a professional interest in the subject. Martinez (1997: 18) recently noted that "although the seriousness of the Latino homicide problem is recognized, its study is largely ignored."

Until relatively recently, the ethnic status of victims and offenders was not reported to the FBI. At the national level, Hispanic victims were often identified as white, thereby making it difficult to define national homicide rates for persons of Hispanic origin. This is further complicated by the use of ethnic categories within the Hispanic population that divides the population into ethnic-origin groups, such as Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other South Americans.

At the national level, the absence of data providing racial identifiers has slowed efforts to compare Hispanic victimization and risk levels with those of blacks and whites. At the local level, however, comparisons have already begun (see Shai and Rosenwaike, 1988). Studies comparing victimization rates among blacks, whites, and Hispanics at the city level show variations in levels of risk among these groups in individual cities. Generally, levels of

Table 1.1. *Mean Homicide Rates Based on Race and Ethnicity for the City of Milwaukee – 1990*
Rate per 100,000

Gender	Black	Hispanic	White
Male	106.0	50.0	11.6
Female	14.5	–	3.8

Source: Computed by the authors based on data provided by the Milwaukee Police Department.

Hispanic risk fall somewhere between those of blacks and whites (Zahn, 1988). The discrepancy in levels of Hispanic variation seemingly depends on the socioeconomic status of the predominant Hispanic group – Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban – in the local population. In Miami, recent work shows that the difference in the mean homicide rate between Latinos and Anglos was nominal (Martinez, 1997). In this instance, the predominant Hispanic population is Cuban, a group that occupies a higher socioeconomic position in that community's economy than do other Hispanic sub-populations. What we generally know the least about, however, is how black and Hispanic populations residing in similarly disadvantaged neighborhoods differ in victimization levels.

Black and Hispanic Levels of Homicide Victimization in Milwaukee. In Milwaukee, homicide victimization rates (1989–93) for blacks, Hispanics, and whites can be seen in Table 1.1. Table 1.1 reveals the relative ranking of prevailing levels of risk, based on both race/ethnicity and gender, among the three populations.² As the table illustrates, males are most often involved in interactions leading to homicide. Hispanic victimization levels fall somewhere between that of blacks and whites, but are substantially more elevated than that of white males. Although Hispanic males exhibited an elevated risk level, not a single Hispanic female was killed during the 1989–93 interval. The extremely low rate of Hispanic female victimization may be suggestive of unique features of Hispanic culture that mitigate against female homicide victimization.

As is true nationally, homicide levels, especially urban homicide levels, are driven by conduct engaged in by black males. While national aggregate

² The rates displayed in Table 1.1 were derived based on the mean number of homicides occurring over a three-year period involving victims from each of the identified groups divided by the size of its population at the time of the 1990 census multiplied by 100,000, that is, $HR = \bar{V}/P \times 100,000$.

homicide levels decreased during the early 1980s, shortly thereafter homicide levels in selected urban areas, for example, Washington, DC, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and St. Louis, among others, appear to have climbed. Since 1985, young black males age fifteen to twenty-four years led the upsurge in urban homicides as both victims and offenders (Blumstein, 1995). Ironically, while risk levels for black males age fifteen to twenty-four years old were rising, risk levels for black males forty and over were declining (see Almgren and others, 1998).

Milwaukee: A Newcomer to High Homicide Victimization

Milwaukee, a city without a history of high levels of homicide, began to join the cluster of urban centers experiencing the most recent epidemic of rising homicide in the late 1980s. Among the more frequent explanations given for the most recent cyclical increase in risk levels are growth of crack cocaine markets (Johnson, 1993; Blumstein, 1996), the growth of urban gangs (Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham, 1991; Spergel, 1992), and the easy availability of handguns (Wright and others, 1992; Blumstein, 1995; Zimring, 1996). The attraction of poor urban youth to gang involvement, drug sales, and easy access to guns is thought to constitute the catalyst for the increased homicide levels in Milwaukee and similar places during the early 1990s.

Milwaukee's Black and Hispanic Populations. Blacks and Hispanics now constitute more than 36 percent of the city's population, with the black population alone making up 30 percent of the total population. Both groups experienced substantial growth during the decade of the eighties. For blacks, between 1985 and 1990, sizable numbers of migrants from elsewhere in the United States chose to settle in Milwaukee. As a result, Milwaukee registered a positive net migration gain, unlike the pattern in other larger Midwest urban centers that experienced net migration losses in their black populations. Migration was a substantial contributor to the 30 percent black population increase occurring in the 1980s. The Hispanic population increased even more rapidly, exceeding 50 percent. Much of this growth was from immigration from abroad.

The Identification of Target Black and Hispanic Neighborhoods. The two neighborhood groups selected for comparison are comprised of eleven census tracts each. Both the black and Hispanic neighborhood clusters can be described as zones of high or concentrated poverty, although they exhibit poverty levels that describe them as either high poverty, or extreme poverty neighborhoods, 40 percent poor families. Such neighborhoods are described by some scholars as zones of underclass residence and are thought

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to support the evolution of an underclass culture (Massey and Denton, 1995; Anderson, 1999). Such labels smack of territorial stigmatization without objectively acknowledging the process that has led to this outcome (see Wacquant, 1996). Jargowski (1996) and Anderson (1999) indicate that even among the poorest of neighborhoods, practitioners of nonmainstream values are likely to constitute the minority. Even within these ecological spaces, broad differences can be observed in particular aspects of their social environment. Nevertheless, the combination of high levels of racial segregation and high levels of poverty appear to stimulate an increase in levels of violent victimization (Peterson and Krivo, 1993; Massey, 1995). The question becomes – How do these differences manifest themselves in ethnic-specific settings? For instance, black majority neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty are places where homicide levels are generally higher than those in neighborhoods where poverty is less extreme. Can the same pattern be observed in Hispanic neighborhoods?

The north side neighborhood cluster is the place of residence of almost 12 percent of the city's black population, but constituted the place of occurrence of 16 percent of the city's homicides in 1990. At the same time, the south side neighborhood setting was home to just under two-fifths of Milwaukee's Hispanic population. It should be noted, however, that these two neighborhood groups, respectively, were the sites of 16 and 4 percent of all homicides committed in the city in 1990. The north side cluster included in this investigation represents less than one-fourth of the concentrated poverty neighborhoods in the city's black community.

What these data suggest are that homicides, in a single year, are four times more likely to occur in black extreme poverty neighborhoods than in similarly situated Hispanic neighborhoods. As it turns out, the black victimization rate, in this cluster of neighborhoods, exceeded 100 per 100,000 in 1990. The victimization rate in the Hispanic cluster was substantially lower, measuring 20 per 100,000 in the same year. What accounts for the wide gap in victimization rates in two similarly situated concentrated poverty neighborhood clusters?

Krivo and Peterson (1996) recently addressed the problem in racial disparities in crime levels between blacks and whites residing in high and/or extreme poverty neighborhoods using data from Columbus, Ohio. They concluded that disadvantaged environments were more important than race in explaining observed differences. Peeples and Loeber (1994) also addressed a variant of this question by examining differences in delinquency rates between black and white youth residing in underclass (high poverty neighborhoods) and nonunderclass neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They found that black youth residing in neighborhoods similar in status to those of white youth engaged in delinquent acts on a scale similar to that of their white peers.