



poverty,
ethnicity,
and
violent
crime

JAMES F. SHORT, JR.

Crime & Society

Poverty, Ethnicity, and Violent Crime

James F. Short, Jr.

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Poverty, Ethnicity, and Violent Crime

CRIME & SOCIETY

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Foreword

I cannot imagine a more appropriate person than James Short to write about poverty, ethnicity, and violent crime in America. Short brings to this topic a vast experience that ranges from his field research in minority neighborhoods of Chicago through a scholarly career distinguished by major theoretical and methodological innovations to public service on high profile government commissions and panels on violence and crime. Throughout, Jim Short has earned a distinguished reputation for the balance of reason and insight that he brings to controversial social problems, a reputation that has seen him honored, for example, by election to the presidencies of the American Sociological Association and the American Society of Criminology. His contribution on the topic of this volume is especially timely.

As Short demonstrates in an encyclopedic review of the research literature, the contemporary United States is a dangerously violent place, and individuals and families in impoverished minority communities are especially vulnerable to the resulting mayhem. Short squarely confronts these interconnected problems, emphasizing that the association of violent crime with young males in the African-American ghettos of this nation involves an array of problems, not the least of which is the fear and suspicion created in the minds of more affluent Americans.

Too few citizens are today able to get past their fears and suspicions of minority youth to confront the more daunting realization that changes in the social and economic structure of the United States are responsible for strong connections between race, poverty, and violence. These forces of social and economic change have devastated families and communities that are the foundation of the life chances of growing numbers of American minority youth. Short documents these changes through a comprehensive and insightful mix of quantitative and qualitative, micro- and macro-level data on poverty, ethnicity, and violent crime.

This analysis includes a cautious, yet compelling call to action on the part of American social science, warning that social policy will be made with or without the input of researchers and observing that given this choice, citizens are surely better served by scholars who are willing to join the policy fray. The logic of this charge is strikingly supported by Short's assessment of our recent national reliance on imprisonment. The bottom line to this assessment is that we are spending more on prison construction, administration, and on maintaining prison

populations than on the types of social policies that scientific research and theory convincingly urge we need.

This book reasonably argues that dispassionate research provides better leads to crime control than do the more impassioned political appeals to public fear and suspicion. This research teaches, for example, that early education and family support are among the most promising tools for effective delinquency and violence prevention. The strong recommendation is that we need to invest more of our resources in building "social capital" through community institutions that support families such as schools, churches, neighborhood centers, and recreational programs. The tragedy is that we are investing less in these institutions, whereas we are placing a level of trust in prisons that no known research literature can sustain.

Characteristically, Short does not in the end recommend placing all of our hopes on any single program or policy. A shrewd believer in hedging our theoretical and practical bets, Short instead urges that we promote a range of programs that address a variety of needs. He counsels further that private as well as public initiatives are required. This book is in the end a powerful argument for the redirection of American crime policy, built on a clearheaded and painstaking integration of theory and research that is the hallmark of the unique reputation and accomplishments of its author. This book can well serve as every student's, scholar's, citizen's, and politician's guide to the causes and prevention of criminal violence in America.

John Hagan

Preface

This book began as an essay prepared for the Panel on Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior, a group assembled by the Committee on Law and Justice, one of several committees of the National Research Council's Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (CBASSE) (see Reiss and Roth 1993). However, the book's roots go back at least another quarter of a century to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson following the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. I served that commission as co-director of research (with Marvin E. Wolfgang) (see Short 1976).

In still another sense the book is a product of a lifetime of training, research, and experience. Violent behavior has been a personal preoccupation for most of my adult life, including the time before I entered graduate school at the University of Chicago in 1947.

I grew up in a small Midwestern town where one could safely walk the streets at night and serious violence was virtually unheard of (Short 1969, 1990b). Like many others, I learned a lot about violence during and after World War II. In early 1946, while I was serving in the occupation forces in Japan, a civilian had been assaulted and was brought, nearly dead, to the small headquarters I shared with a platoon of U.S. Marines. I contacted battalion headquarters and secured the emergency services of a hospital corpsman who brought with him life-saving medical supplies.

Local police had brought the man to me because he had identified his assailants as American servicemen, and we were the only such in the immediate area. After arranging for medical treatment, my platoon sergeant and I shook down the entire platoon and quickly discovered the culprits—two marines, barely out of their teens. Their motive apparently was money, although the amount stolen was paltry. They confessed readily but neither they nor anyone else could understand why they had committed the crime.

I was distressed not only for the victim but because I had come to like these young men in the few months since I had become their platoon leader. Their bizarre behavior seemed totally inconsistent with their performance on the job and with what I thought I knew about them. The situation became even more bizarre when they asked me—in effect, their arresting officer—to defend them at their court martial. I agreed to represent them and, because they confessed so

readily and were themselves quite distressed, to plead for some relief from the harsh system of military justice. That was not to be (junior officers had little clout in such situations). The men were sentenced to prison and dishonorable discharge.

I felt I had failed both because the assault had occurred on my watch and because I did not believe these young men were likely to come out of the experience, my handling of it, and their prison sentences as better persons or citizens than they were prior to this unfortunate episode. I regret that I do not know what actually happened to them following their departure from my platoon. But the experience had a profound influence on me and I resolved to do a better job with my men, and to learn more about violent behavior and what could be done about it. No further criminal acts were committed by members of my platoon during the next several months we spent in Japan, but my curiosity remained unsatisfied. What follows is a distillation of some of what I learned about violent behavior over the next several decades.

The book owes much to many people, most immediately to my Washington State University colleague Charles Tittle and to Westview editorial board members John Hagan and Rob Sampson, who read and critiqued the manuscript. Sampson's work, especially, informs the heart of the book, Chapter 4. Fellow members of the NRC Panel on Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior, especially Colin Loftin, Ted Gurr, and Eli Anderson, wrote memos and gave advice in other ways. Panel chair Al Reiss and NRC staffer Jeff Roth helped me think through a variety of problems.

Truly a host of others have helped in ways too numerous to count: colleagues on the commission and staff of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, faculty and students in places I have taught and lectured, personnel of agencies with whom I have worked as researcher and consultant, family members, teachers, and peers throughout my life who have taught me about life and humanity as well as about violence and other ills that plague humankind. Westview editor Jill Rothenberg and her predecessor, Dean Birkenkamp, were constant sources of encouragement. And without the fine work of Washington State University's Social and Economic Sciences Research Center, especially Tammy Small, this book and much of my work over the past decade might never have seen the light of day.

Finally, to Jay and Anni, and by extension to grandchildren everywhere, this book is dedicated. May they and future generations be spared the tragedies so often associated with violent crime.

James F. Short, Jr.
Pullman, Washington

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Chapter One

Introduction

Violence, aggression, violent crime. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, they have very different technical meanings. Depending on the specific behaviors classified under these labels and the contexts in which they occur, they also have very different consequences.

The National Research Council's Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior defined violence as "behavior by persons against persons that intentionally threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts physical harm" and noted that "behaviors included in this definition are largely included in definitions of aggression" (Reiss and Roth 1993, p. 35). Aggression, thus, is a broader term than violence, encompassing behaviors that are intended to intimidate or humiliate, for example, but not to physically harm.

Much of what we know about the relationship between early childhood experiences and later violent behavior is based on research on the antecedents and observed correlates of aggression among children. Studies that follow children over a period of years find that children who are aggressive toward other children at around age 8 are more likely than others to exhibit violent behavior and to be delinquent or criminal as adolescents and adults (Reiss and Roth 1993, p. 103; Farrington 1989, 1991). The majority of such youngsters do not become seriously delinquent, criminal, or violently aggressive, however, and the mechanisms that distinguish those who do from those who do not are not well understood. I shall have more to say about the antecedents and correlates of aggressive childhood behavior in later chapters.

Violence and aggression are both more general classes of behaviors than are violent crimes. Violent crimes are distinguished from violence and aggression in that they are prohibited by the criminal law. Under the criminal law, specific classes of behavior are defined as crimes. Crime statistics result from the accounting practices of criminal justice and other governmental agencies charged with such responsibilities. Because data are collected by law enforcement and other official systems concerning the frequency with which such crimes are reported to the police, or the frequency of arrests or convictions of persons for commission of

these crimes, large bodies of data are available for analysis. In addition, other official agencies, such as the U.S. Census Bureau and the Centers for Disease Control, collect data on some types of violent crime. These and other data systems are discussed and evaluated in Chapter 2. The availability of such data is both a strength and a weakness—a strength because data on homicide, in particular, are as reliable and valid as any system of data concerning human behavior are likely to be; a weakness because the behaviors classified as violent crimes, including homicide, mask a great deal of variability in behavior.

News accounts illustrate this point daily. A 1993 Conference on Urban Violence used a case study of weekend violence in a fictional city, “Cornet,” to orient conference participants to the variety of violent behaviors that they, as members of an “Antiviolence Task Force,” must deal with. The fictional report is similar to the actual report (cited by the NRC panel) from the *New York Times* of nine homicides that occurred in the New York City area on Christmas Eve and Day, 1990 (see Reiss and Roth 1993, pp. 31–32).

Six Slain in Weekend Murders; Victims Include 3-Year-Old

In the city’s bloodiest weekend this year, six people died under circumstances ranging from child abuse to robbery.

On Friday evening there was an emergency call to an apartment in the Southwood section of the city, where police found a 3-year-old girl on the living room floor. The child had broken bones and multiple skull fractures, and was pronounced dead at the scene. Frank Cartwell, the common-law husband of the child’s mother, was taken into custody. The mother has not yet been located.

In a second domestic matter a woman was shot by her estranged husband as she left her apartment. The previous week Teresa Cordoba had tried to get her husband arrested for threatening to kill her. A restraining order had been issued, according to Superior Court officials.

On Saturday night a convenience store clerk was shot twice in the head after being robbed by two men. Sung K. Suk, father of the slain man and the store’s owner, witnessed the murder. He said that his son had offered no resistance. “He had given them [the] money and he was on his knees with his hands on [his] head. But the guy stood there . . . shot him point-blank. It was really brutal.”

Early Sunday morning an argument in the parking lot of a local bar left one man dead of multiple knife wounds. His assailant, Lawrence J. Peterson, also was wounded during the altercation and is listed in stable condition at the County Hospital. Patrons of the Hitching Post said the fight started when Peterson and the deceased, Michael Harrington, tried to leave the parking lot at the same time and had a minor collision. This was the third violent altercation at the bar so far this month.

A 17-year-old restaurant employee who was fired last week returned to his former place of work and opened fire on employees in the kitchen. The restaurant’s owner was killed and several employees were wounded, one seriously. The youth, whose name is being withheld because of his age, fled the scene but was later arrested at his home.

Finally, 22-year-old Anita Woods was gunned down in the 700 block of Forten Street, in an aging section of Southwood known as Poplar Hills. CCPD detectives report that they have no motive at this time. (Kelly 1994)

These examples, diverse as they are, are only a sampling of the many types of behaviors that are classified as murder and nonnegligent manslaughter (homicide) thousands of times each year in this and in other countries. Such diversity is multiplied many times over by the inclusion of other legally classified violent offenses such as simple and aggravated assault and robbery. These and other types of illegal violent behavior will be discussed as we probe ethnographic studies for illustrations of theoretical points and clues to explanation.

It is important also to note that data systems of comparable scope and comprehensiveness are not available for noncriminal violent and other aggressive behaviors. This is particularly true for data regarding the socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnicity of offenders. For this reason the primary focus throughout the book is on criminal violence.

This focus is not as restrictive as it might at first appear, however. Violent crime covers a wide variety of specific behaviors and it is related in complex ways to many other types of behaviors and human conditions. The first task is to describe what is known about the historical background of violent crime (at the end of this chapter) and about patterns and trends of violent crime, the topic of Chapter 2. Chapter 3 then discusses “levels of explanation” of violent crime, an important notion both for understanding violence and for the organization of the book. The next six chapters are the primary focus of the book as noted in the title—the role of poverty and ethnic status in violent crime. Chapter 4 reviews studies that attempt to take into account a variety of contextual factors that enter into poverty-ethnicity-violence relationships, focusing especially on neighborhood and community contexts. Chapter 5 narrows the focus to youth groups, especially gangs, that are responsible for much violent crime. Building on previous chapters, the focus of Chapter 6 is on levels of explanation of violent crime committed in groups. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 are concerned with theories that attempt to explain violence and with integrating different levels of explanation. The final chapter focuses on what is known and, more importantly, what we need to know about controlling violent behavior.

The *social distribution* of violent crime—how much of it there is among categories of socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity—explains neither offending nor victimization. Rather, it requires explanation. The “facts” concerning homicide offending or victimization, for example, do not explain how or why these events occurred. Instead they tell us what must be explained. The bulk of the book, therefore, is devoted to analysis of the research literature that informs and attempts to explain the occurrence of violent crime among individuals, groups, and communities that vary in racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status composition.

The relevant literature is vast, complex, and controversial. Four conclusions from my review of this literature guide the organization of the book and its primary focus: (1) the linkage of what I shall call the individual, micro- and macrosocial levels of explanation is vital to the understanding and the explanation of violent crime; (2) although the precise nature of that linkage is unknown, it clearly involves the impacts of socioeconomic status on individuals, communities, and families; (3) understanding why teenagers and young adults commit so much violent crime is important to the explanation of violent crime; (4) violence among the young tends to involve others as co-offenders; hence, the nature of youth collectivities, such as gangs, is of special interest.

The relevance of categories of SES, race, and ethnicity to explanation—that is, to understanding the causes of violent crime—is problematic for many reasons, among them: (1) these relationships have changed markedly over the years; (2) they exhibit great variation from place to place; (3) rates of violent behavior, insofar as they can be determined, vary greatly within SES, racial, and ethnic categories; (4) the categories that are used to classify SES, race, and ethnicity mask a great deal of variation in the *circumstances* of persons living in different socioeconomic categories and among persons classified by ethnicity or race; (5) classification of persons as “Hispanic” or “Latino,” “Asian,” “black” or African American, “white,” or “Native American” is based not on rigorous scientific criteria, but on general (and often erroneous) social criteria; persons so identified often identify themselves in very different ethnic terms that are not recognized in these broad categories;¹ and (6) social class-, ethnic-, or race-specific data on violent offenders and victims and on explanatory variables and processes related to these categories of persons often are lacking or of poor quality.

These points introduce a healthy dose of reality and skepticism, particularly with regard to the meaning of statistical patterns and trends. It is for this reason that we seek confirmation in repeated statistical observations and in ethnographic observations that capture meanings that are often masked in statistical classification schemes.

The Historical Background

Coming to grips with contemporary crises as complicated and as ancient as interpersonal violence means coming to grips with a long history.

—Monkkonen 1995, p. 114

“The serious historical study of crime, still less than a generation old,” writes historian Roger Lane, “has already fractured a number of popular myths” (Lane 1989, p. 55). Among the latter is the notion that modern rates of violence are especially high, compared to a peaceful and nonviolent past. Indeed, as Ted Robert Gurr notes, our “medieval European ancestors had few inhibitions against clubbing and knifing their neighbors during angry brawls. In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England, when murders were well documented,