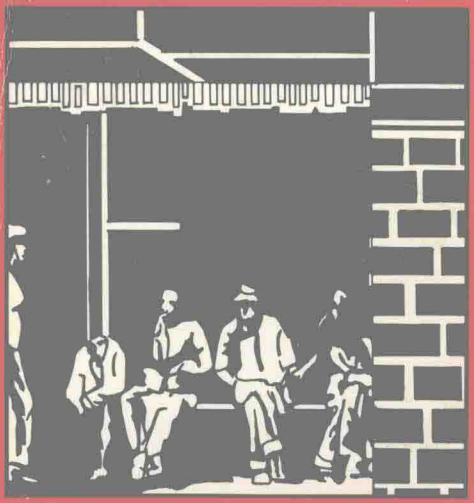
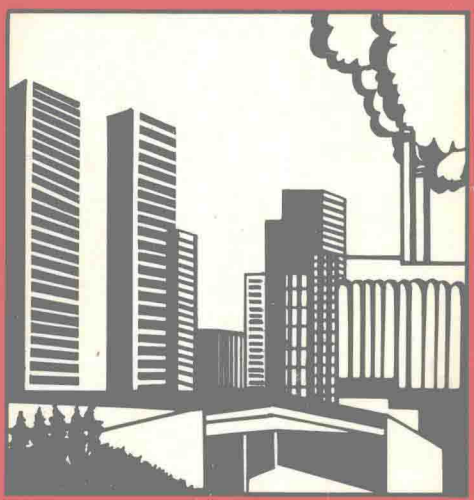


RACE PLACE *and* RISK

Black Homicide in Urban America



Harold M. Rose and Paula D. McClain

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Race, Place, and Risk

SUNY Series in Afro-American Studies

John Howard and Robert C. Smith, Editors

In memory of our colleagues
Maxine L. Nimtz
Rodney J. Fruth

Preface

Blacks have long been the individuals most likely to be the victims and offenders in willfully motivated acts of lethal violence. The risk of homicide victimization in the nation's black communities waxes and wanes as an apparent result of a series of external shocks to those communities. But in both good times and bad times, the level of risk among blacks tends to be higher than that of any other racial or ethnic population. In spite of the seriousness of the problem, academic researchers seldom have chosen to focus on this phenomenon.

This lack of attention to black victimization may be attributed intuitively to a combination of factors. First, there has been a tendency to shy away from research that focused on stigmatizing individual behaviors, at least prior to the 1960s. Second, there has been a reluctance to pursue topics that focused direct attention on negative black behavior. But regardless of the motivation, black homicide risk seldom has been addressed in a holistic fashion. This investigation represents a serious effort to begin to fill the void.

In view of the paucity of research interest in this topic, we acknowledge that a single volume on the subject can focus in-depth only on selected aspects of the problem. Given our academic training (geography and political science), we are inclined to emphasize those aspects of which we are knowledgable. The emphasis of this book is on high-risk homicide environments within a sample of large black communities that are embedded in a regional cross-section of cities. We address a series of macro- and micro-structural forces within those environments that we contend abet both risk and structure of victimization. Thus, we do not confine our attention simply to individual-level flaws that lead to behavior in which victimization probabilities become attenuated, but to a series of forces, both external and internal to the community and the individual, that lead to heightened risk.

The most obvious realization growing out of such an approach is the complexity of the phenomena under review. The lowering of risk requires a comprehensive understanding of homicide as a multifaceted phenomenon for which easy solutions are not likely to be forthcoming. Therefore, we have strayed from attempting to provide easy solutions

to a complex problem, and, instead, have attempted to provide a balanced treatment of those factors that contribute to elevated risk.

Rose's interest in the increased levels of black homicide was generated in the early 1970's by his brief stay in a midwestern metropolitan area in which homicide risk in the metropolitan black community had become extremely elevated. Nightly, media accounts made it quite clear who both the victims and offenders were—urban, black residents. Journalistic interest in these violent encounters far outstripped scholarly interest, and without the visual media's focus of attention on the despair within our midst, the problem would undoubtedly go unnoticed outside the confines of those high-risk environments. Thus, if he had not served as a visiting professor at a university located in this metropolitan area, the seed for this investigation may never have been planted.

It was only then that Rose began to discover the seriousness of the problem and the dearth of research exploring the topic. Upon returning to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he began to familiarize himself with the literature on the topic and began to work on the proposal that would allow a more rigorous grasp of the seriousness and nature of the problem, at least in a large urban context.

McClain became involved in the project in 1977 when she joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Rose wandered into her office shortly after her arrival and began to discuss his ideas for a proposal to study urban homicide. She caught Rose's enthusiasm for the topic and a research partnership was formed. The homicide project has been the driving force behind much of her later work on firearms and public policy, the urban environment and homicide, and, most recently, fieldwork with a police homicide detail. In 1982, she moved to Arizona State University, but the joint research on the project continued. This volume is the outcome of a collaboration extending over more than a decade.

Without extramural support, our proposed research effort would have never gotten off the ground. The Minority Mental Health Center of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) provided financial support for the project, and the "Black Homicide Project" was initiated in the fall of 1977. The project was a large and complex undertaking that involved a large number of individuals performing a variety of tasks. With the assistance of staff, consultants, fieldworkers, and the unfaltering support of key individuals at the Minority Mental Health Center, the work was completed in the summer of 1980. The final report developed for the funding agency served as the groundwork for this much more extensive study.

Two individuals who contributed so much to the success of the earlier project but did not live to see this volume completed are Dr. Maxine L. Nimtz (anthropologist) and Dr. Rodney J. Fruth (psychiatrist). It is to them that we dedicate this book. Other persons involved with the project were Dr. Donald R. Deskins (geographer), Dr. Richard Henry (sociologist), Dr. Richard H. Patterson (psychiatrist), and Mrs. Elaine Fruth (social worker). Dr. Mary Harper of the National Institute of Mental Health, Dr. Franklin Zimring, Mrs. Gwendolyn Stephenson, and Mr. Leon Ashford also provided invaluable advice and counsel. We are extremely grateful for the dedication to the project displayed by our primary staff: Mrs. Diane Simons, project director, and Ms. Linda Johnson, project secretary. Numerous other persons were involved in making the research effort a success, but special thanks are extended to our interview teams in Detroit, Atlanta, and St. Louis.

Special thanks are also extended to the Phoenix Police Department for allowing McClain to follow its homicide detail for five months during the winter and spring of 1989. Although Phoenix is not one of the cities in this study, the experience and information gathered helped with the writing of parts of this book. She is particularly grateful to Assistant Chief Jerry Oliver, Capt. Jim Semenza, Lt. Sharon Kiyler, Sgt. Tim Bryant, and the detectives in the unit for their invaluable assistance.

Although the basic research for the homicide project was centered at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, development of this manuscript was undertaken at Arizona State University. Without the assistance of Cherylene A. Schick of the School of Public Affairs and Marian Buckley, Keith Campbell, Tammy Stein, and Mary Cullen of the College of Public Programs' Auxiliary Resource Center, this manuscript would never have been completed. Their tolerance of and patience with our numerous revisions is greatly appreciated.

We are particularly grateful to Jacqueline Judd Udell for her superb editing of the manuscript, and to John S. Hall who suggested the title. We would also like to thank Robert C. Smith, coeditor of this SUNY series, for his helpful comments and continued support through the review process, as well as to Peggy Gifford, Acquisitions Editor for SUNY Press. Finally, we would like to thank our families—Ann Rose, and Paul C. Jacobson and Kristina L. McClain-Jacobson—for their continued support throughout the project and the subsequent writing of this book.

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Black Homicide and the Urban Environment: An Introduction

In 1980, one out of every three hundred young-adult black males in St. Louis was a victim of homicide. In Detroit, one out of every four hundred fifty young-adult black males lost his life in a violent altercation. Similarly, one out of every four hundred young-adult black males in Los Angeles was a victim of homicide. In many cities throughout the nation, homicides are daily occurrences.

Violence resulting in death occurs at a higher rate in the United States than elsewhere in the developed world. A number of efforts to explain this phenomenon have been undertaken, but a general consensus regarding causation is lacking (Archer and Gartner, 1976; Wolfgang, 1986). Past and present researchers, however, have attributed the relatively high national homicide rate to the persistence of high levels of lethal violence among the nation's black population. Yet, seldom do these researchers partition risk in a way that would allow them to address directly its underlying causes. That is, few researchers have attempted to address elevated risk among the population at highest risk—the nation's black population.

To rationalize higher-than-average homicide rates in the nation at large by stigmatizing the population at highest risk represents a misdirected effort. However, some criminal justice researchers apparently find it easier to label black homicide offenders as "normal primitives" (see Swigert and Farrell, 1976) and/or to assign them other pejorative labels than to arrive at an objective assessment of the persistence of elevated risk in the nation's black communities. Thus, this effort represents an initial attempt at overcoming an apparent research void.

By skirting the issue of elevated risk among blacks, researchers are guilty of failing to address a serious issue in this country—the role of lethal violence on the life expectancy of selected segments of the

black population (Dennis, 1977). Based on the neglect and the growing seriousness of the problem, Comer (1985) was led to urge the development of a more effective national public policy to combat the problem. Poussaint (1983), on the other hand, went so far as to recommend the creation of homicide prevention centers in selected communities characterized by exaggerated black risk. Nevertheless, until recently, the prevailing position has been, as stated by Thomas (1984:157), that "Homicide has received a social reaction and public policy response that tends to normalize violence in the black community." That position undoubtedly is partially responsible for the lack of an ongoing objective assessment of the problem.

Although blacks are acknowledged to be the segment of the population with the greatest exposure to risk, it is ironic that we know so little about this phenomenon beyond an occasional anecdotal treatment. Therefore, the primary goal of this book is to shed light on a phenomenon that needs explanation, but, for a variety of reasons, has rarely been viewed as a high priority research area (Meredith, 1984; Rosenberg and Mercy, 1986; Hawkins, 1986).

THE STATUS OF BLACK HOMICIDE RESEARCH

To effectively address the issue of black homicide in the United States, a broad and extensive research base is needed. For the most part, past researchers have addressed only the general issue of the high level of lethal violence in the United States and not the specific topic of high risk among black Americans. Most of the research on homicide among blacks has been limited, and, in most instances, it is now outdated, although a recent volume edited by Hawkins (1986) represents an important effort to fill a void. A variety of explanations for the lack of research have been offered: 1) there is a general belief that violent interpersonal behavior involving lower-class blacks represents expected behavior; 2) researchers have limited interest in the negative behaviors of a pariah group, as long as these behaviors do not spill over into the larger population; and 3) obtaining race-specific victimization data, at least at local and/or neighborhood levels, is difficult.

Although previous research is limited, a small number of works can be cited that demonstrate there was interest in this topic in the early decades of this century (Brearley 1932; Barnhart, 1932). However, after the Great Depression, interest apparently waned until the post-World War II period (Bullock, 1955; Pettigrew and Spier, 1962). Because this research is dated, however, few insights into the changing nature of the problem are provided. Nevertheless, much is to be gained from