The Politics of Gun Control and Violence Prevention: Do Race and Gun Type Matter?

Introduction

The words chosen by the organizers as the theme for this conference are both insightful and timely. It is time to take stock of just where we stand in our attempt to understand and control what has for many decades been an epidemic of gun violence in the United States. The words they have chosen also describe in many ways what has been my career-long agenda, namely my ongoing effort to conduct research and propose theory designed to help explain the extremely high rates of homicide that have existed in African American communities for nearly a century.

In 1983, after several years of examining both current and historical trends in rates of homicide in the U.S., I wrote my first of many articles on the subject. Just this year, I published my most recent contribution to the subject. In all that I have written, one theme that has remained consistent is one that is included in the that of today's conference. This is the belief that to truly understand the causes of the disproportionate involvement of black Americans in homicide; we must take into account the ways in which our country's patterns of systemic racism operates. I have noted the ways in which it creates a feedback loop in which official responses to that disproportionate involvement, including but not limited to the administration of justice, create conditions that help perpetuate the cycles of violent offending.

Earlier, in 1980 and 1981, I had explored a social psychological dimension of the way that people in the general public respond to crime and violence. In those studies, I reported that what people perceive to be the root causes of offending and victimization matters a lot. University students who answered a survey based on a list of hypothetical violent and nonviolent crime vignettes assigned punishment to offenders based on the seriousness of the crime. Such findings were expected, of course. But, the level of punishment they recommended also reflected their perceptions of the causes of the crime. Generally speaking, they made a distinction between what we can loosely call "external" versus "internal" causal mechanisms.

These are the themes that will drive my comments today as I examine one broad-based aspect of the official response to homicide among black Americans. This is the rise of the public health model in response to the nation's epidemic of youth violence and its relationship to the politics surrounding the gun control movement and the backlash directed towards it. But, first, let me set the stage for my observations. My last public on this subject matter was given toward the end of 2013. In the years that have followed, much has happened, and I believe that many of these developments lend credence to many of the observations I will make regarding race and efforts at gun control and regulation. These include a series of highly publicized events.
that have highlighted our nation’s continuing struggle to come to grips with its history of systemic racism. These included: 1) police killings of black males in urban America, 2) epidemic-like rates of black-on-black and Latino-on-Latino killings, many of which were linked to gang feuds in the city of Chicago; and 3) a dramatic rise in heroin and opioid among whites in many of the nation’s Rust Belt communities.

On August 9, 2014, the nation witnessed the killing by Ferguson police of Michael Brown. A few months later on December 3, 2014, Eric Garner died as a result of a police chokehold tactic in New York City. The responses to these two events and the seemingly endless string of police killings of citizens that followed are well known to all in this audience today.

Meanwhile, less than a year after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on July 6, 2015, the senseless and intentional shooting death of the seven-year-old son of a black Chicago gang member by a rival gang member brought attention to senseless cruelty and the tragic loss of life in that city. On June 4, 2016, a stray bullet meant for a rival gang member killed a former Chicago high school cheerleader as she gathered with her friends in a park on the South Side of that city.

Finally, between late 2013, when I gave my last lecture, and today, indisputable evidence of our nation’s most recent heroin epidemic has emerged. It is conjoined with an equally deadly epidemic of untimely deaths involving prescription opioids. While deaths have occurred nationwide, hardest hit have been those states from New England down the Appalachian Mountain Trail and extending westward to the Ohio River Valley.

In response to these events, two interlocking observations/questions involving race have repeatedly been made by both members of the general public and politicians/policy makers alike. Many have asked if whites were the primary victims of police killings of citizens if the responses from the public would be different. Does the race of victims affect the nature of public policies aimed at remediation which are enacted or contemplated in the wake of these killings? Are white victims of the current heroin/opioid epidemic accorded greater empathy than black inner-city residents who were disproportionately represented among those who were casualties of the heroin epidemic of the late 1960s and early 1970s, or more recently the crack cocaine deluge of the 1980s and early 1990s? That is, do our public and official responses to such human disasters differ by the race of the victims?

It is my contention these valid questions that must be probed given our nation’s history of racism. It also true that there is much evidence that race effects and racism do indeed affect the ways in which the general public, politicians and decision makers respond to the epidemics.
of carnage and death I just described. They also shape the ways in which we academics who study such phenomena describe and analyze them.

Like so many others in my profession, including those who share the stage with me today, I am a social scientist who has spent a career examining how the inequality most often tied to race produces the extreme group differences in crime and violence that are now well documented. On the other hand, it has been equally clear to me throughout my career that race also affects the ways that researchers, members of the public, politicians, and policy makers themselves respond to those stark ethnic and racial differences. Examining the potential effects of race on our responses to violence, as opposed to the perceived causes of violence in the theme that I have explored in my most recent work on race and violence, and it is a theme that guides my presentation today. Unfortunately, much of criminological research can be described as divided into dual tracks. One probes the ways in which race and ethnicity affect the “causes” of criminal behaviors. The second stream of research explores the ways in which race and ethnic differences matter in the responses by the public, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system to those persons who commit a crime.

My presentation is designed to explore the question of whether race matters in the way that academics, policy makers, and politicians have responded during the past to gun violence. In particular, I examine whether considerations of race and ethnicity may affect the nature of those social movements that we have labeled the “gun control lobby.” I will focus on what I consider to be one of the pivotal societal responses to the nation’s epidemic of gun violence, namely the social movements and public policies aimed at gun regulation and control. However, I also seek to place the gun control lobby within the much broader body of societal responses, including political decision making, lawmaking and the searches for potential “solutions/remedies” that have been directed towards gun violence. A pivotal question underlying all of what I now begin to probe is the following:

- Given the disproportionate rates of gun violence found among youths and adults who reside in communities of color (African American, Latino, and Native American) why are these communities not more instrumental and visible actors and collaborators within the nation’s gun control movement and its allied organizational apparatuses?
- Would greater involvement of people of color in the gun control movement effect greater change in the levels of gun violence now found in their communities?
There are clearly no quick and easy answers to these two questions, but my presentation is designed to begin a line of discourse that is badly needed if we are to respond adequately to the nation’s epidemic of youth violence, and its disparate impact on youths of color. To explore the questions posed above, I will utilize a selective timeline or chronology of events from the 1970s to the present. They represent developments which I think foreshadow and help to explain the current state of affairs. I attempt to identify significant dates and events that have helped shape the public’s overall response to gun violence and specifically those that have contributed to the racial divide I just described.

Before the Youth Violence Epidemic: A Selective Timeline of Academic and Public Policy Responses

The Quiet Before the Storm?

In 1986, two well-respected criminologists, Phil Cook and John Laub, published an article in one of the top-rated journals of their discipline. After tracking rates of crime among American adolescents during the preceding decades, they titled their essay "The (Surprising) Stability of Youth Crime Rates." The article was written after years of political contests at all levels of government in which the words "law and order" were the mantra for the day. Twelve years later in 1998, they countered by writing another essay titled "The Unprecedented Epidemic in Youth Violence." In it, they acknowledged that they and many other criminologists who track long-term crime trends were somewhat blindsided by this upsurge, especially the prominent role that guns had begun to play in acts of violence even among adolescents. In the little more than a decade since they first wrote about the stability of youth violence these same youths, especially those of color, were being described as super predators, gangbangers who had a complete disregard for the sanctity of life, and as roving urban thugs prone to engage in acts of "wilding."

Given such a stark change in both rates of violence and public perceptions over a relatively short period, criminologists began to ask what social forces and on-the-ground events within the U.S., especially urban areas, led to the alarming rise in lethal, gun-linked violence. Indeed, that has been the agenda among researchers in all the years that have followed. They have also asked whether there were clues that crime researchers may have missed in looking at the earlier period. To the extent that they did, does that potential oversight have relevance for understanding where we are today in the battle to cut down on the rates of lethal gun violence now seen in urban black and Latino communities?
In my work, I have suggested that indeed many relevant clues were missed especially in observations of black and Latino communities. Regarding African American youths, I noted that the period before the 1980s rise in rates of lethal violence, many clues were missed or overlooked. In a 2011 article, I argued that a confluence of events within urban black America led to a "perfect storm" of crime and violence producing conditions. More recently I have continued that line of argument by observing that one of the least contentious observations in the criminological sciences is the finding that in the United States, a person’s racial and ethnic classification is strongly associated with the level of involvement and contact he or she will have with the criminal justice system. In the case of interpersonal violence, it is now quite clear that much of that differential involvement derives from actual differences in behavior rather than selective detection of wrongdoing or bias in the administration of justice. What is now labeled as the nation’s continuing epidemic of both lethal and non-lethal gun violence provides a clear example of the stark racial and ethnic differences found in rates of both offending and victimization.

The points below represent summations of my major arguments and key observations:

First, in response to the now well-documented rise in rates of gun violence in the U.S. during the last four decades and more came a vigorous and robust gun control debate and movement. It was inextricably aligned with an equally vigorous initiative aimed at treating gun violence as a preventable public health concern. Hotly contested by the National Rifle Association from the start, this two-pronged movement has not ceased to exist and may have enormous potential for devising solutions to what continues to be an epidemic of gun violence in the United States.

Second, given the disproportionate involvement and victimization of people of color in gun-related violence, communities of color and their leaders would appear to be a vital cog in any movement aimed at curbing the availability and ease of access to guns. But, for the most part, those communities have been missing in action as participants in this nationwide debate and movement. There has not been a widespread embrace by communities of color of the specific issues, concerns and modes of protest that are found within the mainstream gun control/gun regulations movements that have come into existence in the United States during the last four decades. Ultimately, however, any success that gun control organizations will have in countering the success of gun rights groups in promoting greater public access to firearms will come only with greater involvement of those communities that are most affected by gun violence, namely communities of color.

Third, political rhetoric such as that recently hurled by conservatives at the Black Lives Movement aside, there has long existed within poor black and Latino neighborhoods community-based initiatives aimed at violence reduction and prevention. These efforts
became much better organized and prevalent during the early to mid-1970s. However, far too often these organizations and movements do not place at the forefront of their agendas specific objectives and goals that target gun regulation as a means of reducing violence. There are many obvious exceptions, of course. For example, there have been concerted localized efforts aimed at gun regulation by civil rights icon, Jesse Jackson, and the activist priest, Michael Pfleger, in Chicago. And in New York City, the courageous efforts of Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City to curb interstate marketing of guns was a stimulus for much of the current mainstream organizations aimed at promoting greater gun regulations. Such efforts, both of which were directed at the problem of gun violence among people of color, have not, however, led to significantly greater collaboration between mainstream gun control organizations and grassroots initiatives aimed at violence prevention. Hence, a racial divide has continued to exist. For example, the existence of such local efforts has not led major actors within the nation’s larger gun regulations movement nor other politicians and policy makers to attempt to engage communities of color by devoting the kind of attention to the regulation of handguns that is often paid to long guns.

Finally, to the extent that my observations are correct, we must begin to ask why this has happened and move toward making the changes needed to address reasons for this seeming divide along the lines of race, and perhaps also social class.

The 1970s in Brown and Black: Beginnings of a Perfect Storm

In retrospect, it i clear that in many ways the decade between the mid-70s and mid-80s represented the calm before the storm regarding youth violence. So Cook and Laub were not off base when describing it as a time of relative stability in overall rates of youth crime, including crime and violence. However, their attentiveness to the big picture, meaning the entire nation and all crime types, may have led them to be inattentive to the fact that such composite data concealed: 1) the beginning of an upsurge in the use of guns, and 2) the fact that by the mid to late 1970s, homicide rates were already beginning to climb among black males between 14 and 24, and guns were the weapon of choice. These largely urban black and Latino males were beginning to experience a largely unnoticed mini-epidemic of homicidal violence. The fact that this period was followed by a few years of declining rates added to the seeming long-term credibility of Cook and Laub's to the views of stable rates of crime and violence. That is, many more years would pass before that 1970s uptick was overshadowed by even higher rates in the 80s.

It is also now clear that criminologists looking at crime and violence data during the early to mid-80s tended to overlook the important work being done around the same time on
the rise of the urban underclass. In 1980 Douglas Glasgow wrote about an emerging black underclass. His work inspired similar work by William Julius Wilson in 1987. Both authors observed that as early as 1970, there were indications of joblessness due to the demise of factory jobs in the U.S. Along with the nation's legacy of systemic racism those changes led to a kind of "last hired, first fired" phenomenon in which this deindustrialization initially affected workers of color and their families disproportionately. We now know that it would be several more decades before evidence that these same social forces took the same toll on white industrial workers would become clearer. Indeed, it appears that the support for Donald Trump signals the ways in which a white underclass has arisen in response to the deindustrialization that began nearly a half-century ago.

There was also some inattentiveness by criminologists studying crime trends in the early to mid-1980s to the rise of youth gangs and gang wannabes in urban black and brown communities. Perhaps reflecting the deindustrializing forces described by Glasgow and Wilson, by the early 1970s gang conflicts were a part of the equation. The mini-epidemic of gun violence during the 70s among Latinos and African Americans, especially in the nation's largest cities was gang-driven. For post-1980s analysts of crime trends, these facts led to a renewed interest in the historical and contemporary literature on gangs and urban subcultures. The important work of Elijah Anderson became a reference source for many who sought to examine the ways in which cultural values and behavioral repertoires among urban youths of color gave rise to both the upsurge of gun violence during the i970s and the bigger bloodbath that followed in the 80s.

My work is consistent with this line of inquiry but also critical of some aspects of it. In my latest work (2017), I contend that to understand better the role of gangs and other dimensions of youth (sub)cultures in black communities we must contextualize them in ways that show their moorings in the broader history and political economy of all of black America. At the same time, I have also observed that crime and violence among black and brown youths during the 1970s period made them the equivalent of the "canary in the (coal) mine." For example, when the "causes" of that upsurge are examined closely, the violence among youths during this early period were quite predictive of future trends involving the use of guns, including long guns, in perpetrating acts of violence in their own communities as well as in white communities (Hawkins, 2011).

To examine the latter possibility that some of the crime and violence trends and causal mechanisms observed in communities of color have their equivalents in other communities, let us now turn to an examination of what I consider to be predictive, miner's canary-like patterns of criminal involvement involving white victims and offenders during the 1970s.
The 1970s in White: Signs of Things to Come?

The 1970s also witnessed an omen of things to come regarding gun violence committed by and against white youths. Retrospective data analyses for the period show an upsurge in school shootings in the mid- to late-1970s, as such incidents moved to near record levels. For the 1970s more than twenty (20) separate shootings were reported. But because most of these early shootings did not involve multiple victims and some resulted in only injury and not death, they remained under the radar regarding public perceptions and concerns. By the late 1980s change appeared on this front as well. In January of 1989 in an incident that resembled the Sandy Hook school shooting of 2012, an adult armed with an assault rifle killed five and wounded 29 others at the Cleveland School of Stockton, California. Before year's end, California became the first state to pass a law aimed at banning assault weapons. Many see this law as the beginnings of a sustained push by gun control advocates to use legislative initiatives to help curb levels of gun violence. These law-oriented and gun-centered violence prevention efforts dovetailed nicely with the push within public health to declare violence a public health problem as opposed to matters to be handled exclusively in post hoc ways by the criminal justice system. This development is one that I will describe in greater detail later.

But it is important to note that these events seem to presage later events that would have a profound effect on the gun control movement in the U.S. So, it is worth noting here some of those events that came later. Between 1992 and 1995 more than 15 school site shootings were reported in the U.S, including a 1992 incident in Lyndhurst, California that resulted in 3 deaths. Some of these incidents occurred in black and Latino schools, but a pattern of white, non-inner city school age shooters also was beginning to emerge. We all know that by 1998 there was the widely publicized shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas that involved four victims killed by two classmates, age 11 and 13. And in 1999, in Columbine Colorado, two white males, aged 17 and 18 killed 12 students, one teacher and wounded 21 more.viii Despite these developments which changed the profile of the white school site shooter from an adult outsider to a school age insider, much of the fear regarding the risk of violence for white youths remained centered on the “outsider.” It is precisely such images (both real and imagined) of school children dying at the hands of adult outsiders that drive the recent and continuing passage of state-level laws that aim to allow guns in the school setting.

The 1980s and 1990s: Scientific, Public Policy, and Legal Responses to Gun Violence: The Significance of Race

The early 1980s marked the beginnings of a series of public policy-related responses to both of these emerging gun violence epidemics, the one in color and the one in white. It also marked an intensification of what was to become a national gun control debate. It is my
contention that even at these early beginnings of public policy initiatives aimed at curbing gun violence, there was evidence that race mattered. It often mattered in ways that are at once quite obvious and inevitable, but also in ways that often unacknowledged and more circuitous. In both respects, I think that these developments began to show the ways, particularly, in which considerations of the race of the victims of gun violence appear to have shaped the ways in which both policy makers and members of the general public have responded. That is, I believe that the public response to each of these epidemics has been racialized to some degree. I also believe that this racialization is at times "structural" in the sense that it is an inevitable artifact of crime and violence statistics themselves. On the other hand, as I will show in the conclusion of my presentation, some aspects of this race-of-victim effect derives from traditional forms of stereotyping that are part of race and intergroup relations in our country. In either case, one of the consequences is the lack of full involvement of communities of color in the more broad-based social movement aimed at curbing access to firearms in the U. S.

The Rise of the Public Health Model of Gun Violence and NRA Backlash

In 1983 I had the opportunity to be part of a gathering of public health, criminal justice and law enforcement folks at a conference at Johns Hopkins University. It was in response to continuing requests from community leaders and activists in urban African American and Latino communities who were beginning to insist that more attention is paid to seeking solutions to the increasingly undeniable youth violence epidemic. They also contended that up to that point there had in their view been little concern expressed by politicians and other public officials for the magnitude of the gun violence problems their communities faced. In response, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) along with the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH) convened a conference specifically designed to begin to address the growing rise in rates of homicide, especially among black youths.

By 1985 the NIMH had relinquished its role as a leader in this effort and shifted its available violence related funding stream to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The CDC’s Division of Injury Epidemiology and Control had already begun to document the post-1970s rise in rates of youth homicide through its in-house *Homicide Surveillance* newsletter. This was the period when I became involved with the CDC’s violence prevention initiative and later spent a half-year as visiting scientist within the injury control unit. This was also the period when the embrace of the concept of violence as a preventable public health problem enveloped not only the work of the CDC but criminological research as well.

Public health practitioners whether trained in medicine or the social sciences see themselves as epidemiologists whose data-accumulation approach to violence was for the most part race neutral. Similarly, they have tended to view their approaches to violence prevention in the same way. Based on my more than thirty years of direct contact with the public health
community, most epidemiologists attempt to steer clear of questions regarding the causes and correlates of racial and ethnic disparities. But like their data-gathering counterparts in criminology, such questions often cannot be avoided when viewing rates of violence over time, the clustering of violence in certain locales and not others, and the sheer size of the racial/ethnic gap for most forms of disease, injury, and death. For example, given the gross racial and ethnic disparities seen in rates of urban street violence and the involvement of white youths as both offenders and victims in school shootings, attention to race effects was inevitable for those viewing the accumulated, aggregated youth violence data.

That said, the role played by the public health community through their advocacy of the public health model for the study and control of gun violence was critical and invaluable during the decade of the mid-1980s and mid-1990s for highlighting gun violence in urban Black America. In 1992, the important research by Lois Fingerhut and her CDC colleagues which tracked the rise of firearm violence among urban black teenagers during the late 1970s and 80s brought the public health model of violence and its focus on guns to the pages of one of the nation's top medical journals. Within the CDC itself, the traditional public health model was extended in the case of youth violence to include a growing research funding stream and widely distributed publications during the 1980s and early 1990s on the role of guns in the perpetration of violence.

And, as we now know, that was the beginning of legislative and other governmental interventions aimed at the CDC by an increasingly powerful National Rifle Association, moves that ended with a successful effort to end gun research at CDC. Alarmed by the passage three years earlier by the passage of the California assault weapons ban, the NRA had already set its sights on derailing the presidential initiatives of Bill Clinton during his first term as president in 1992. After their lobbying had failed to prevent the passage of the 1994 federal assault, they turned their attention to cutting funding of all federal funding aimed at promoting research and policies that appeared to advocate gun control.

Having backed Jay Dickey, a Republican from the Fourth Congressional District of Bill Clinton's home state of Arkansas in his successful efforts to unseat in 1993 a Democrat who was labeled as anti-gun, the NRA called upon him to lead the charge against the CDC. In 1996 Dickey led the move to cut from the CDC budget that portion of its budget linked to gun-related research. And in 1997 an appropriations bill bearing the name of Dickey prevented any CDC funds being used for research. With that ban on research also came a concerted effort to eradicate from the scholarly record citations to the numerous studies that had been conducted before 1996.

The demise of gun research at CDC has posed a significant obstacle to government-funded efforts to attempt to study and promote interventions that might have the potential to
reduce access to guns and break the close association between gun use and lethal violence, especially in the United States. Consequently, I have been a strong advocate in my own public pronouncements of restoring such funding. On the other hand, it is not at all clear that a continuation of the kinds of research in which the CDC specialized will lead to major reductions in gun violence, particularly in light of the inevitable resistance to such efforts by the well organized NRA lobby. Indeed, many within the public health community have seen the demise of gun research as an opening to use available funds to try and devise more person-oriented and place-oriented violence reduction interventions as opposed to the instruments-of-violence approach that the focus on guns represents. They are not giving in to the NRA's "guns don't kill, people do" mantra, but the rise in CDC and other public health funding for developmental studies and community violence approaches are lauded by many.

At the same time, neither the traditional lines of gun research now defunded at CDC nor the funded intervention studies that have taken their place appear to offer remedies for confronting the conundrum or the race-of-victim effects that may prove as a barrier for any successful counterpunch to the gun lobby. For example, during my stay at the CDC during the early 1990s before gun research was outlawed the search was on for was to the agency to respond and also study gun violence. In this instance, what appeared to be potentially viable and effective interventions varied depending on the kind of violence at hand. In response to school site shootings, the CDC had developed a rapid response team format. For each incident, a team of epidemiologists and others would be sent to the site to interview people, survey the scene, and collect data designed to devise future preventive measures. I happened to be at CDC in 1992 during the rioting and disturbances in Los Angeles following the Rodney King trial verdict.

Such response teams appeared to be a good fit for the response to and study of episodic events such as mass victim school shootings and urban riots. These fit squarely within public health notions of "epidemics." After such visits and accompanying data gathering, it is conceivable that interventions can be devised to prevent or better respond to the next such episode of violence. On the other hand, such response teams provide less effective means for responding to and studying non-episodic and non-mass victim gun violence such as that which occurs in economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.

What's Race Got to do with It? It's the Gun Type and Victim Count, Stupid

The heading I use above reflects my acknowledgment that the burden of proof rests on me to prove that what I have labeled race-of-victim effects could just as easily be explained by other factors. Therefore, I will conclude my presentation by showing the ways in which each of these alternative views of the crime control conundrum I describe are inextricably interconnected. For example, although not intended by those who attempt to implement them,
race come to the fore when efforts are made to put in place the kinds of public health interventions I just described. Even where the willingness to intervene and respond to gun violence is present, as at the CDC, race-linked concerns and obstacles remain. That is, would-be intervenors were left to ask how can the largely universal interventions favored by public health practitioners help reduce racial disparities. Indeed, one of the puzzles for epidemiologists working at CDC during the 1990s was the question of how to bring into the confines of the traditional public health model a series of interventions and data gathering modalities that would encompass the longer term, non-episodic violence found in communities of color. Today, some progress has been made, but that objective is yet to be fully achieved. Unfortunately, the work of those criminologists whose work is driven by a desire to use their data to devise interventions aimed squarely at the more or less continuous gun violence found in distressed poor neighborhoods can offer clear advice to their public health associates.

Further, I contend that consideration of the well-documented facts-on-the-ground regarding the nature of American gun violence militates against any easy de-racialization of the tasks that would-be interveners at CDC and those beyond that agency face. For example, when examining the data gathered by Fingerhut at al. (1992) and in later companion studies aimed specifically at examining race differences, the stark racial differences often overshadowed all else, including the use of firearms. For instance, the size of the gap in rates of violence found among urban white teens and black and teens is so large as to lead one to conclude that gun violence is a “non-problem,” comparatively speaking, for whites to a great extent. As a result of such findings and their representations in the popular media, in both public opinion and much of social science research, gun violence of the non-episodic kind is largely considered to be a “black problem” in the U.S. today, as the recent presidential election so clearly illustrated.

On the other hand, the perceived nature of the gun violence problem shifts dramatically in the case of the nation’s episodic mass killings. In those instances, we all know that white adolescents and young adults are disproportionately represented among those involved, including both victims and offenders of school shootings. These stark racial differences, but more importantly the public policy and legal responses to them, lie at the heart of the disengagement of communities of color from the social movement(s) surrounding efforts at gun control. The nation’s gun control movements have arisen out of a confluence of both race-related and non-race-related social forces.

- First, incidents involving multiple victims obviously provoke more outrage and public concern than those involving a single victim. Unless they involve high-profile persons, single victim incidents are less like likely to receive media coverage of the kind that might give rise to public outrage.
• Given the nature of social movements themselves, mass shootings and the weapons involved are more likely to serve as catalysts for targeted public policy aimed at responding to and reducing their future occurrence.

• The fact that whites are the typical victims of those acts of violence that have attracted the most attention of the public and led to the contemporary gun regulation movement(s) in the U.S. is not inconsequential. It is also not inconsequential that the long gun rather than handgun has been the target of law making and policy making under the umbrella of gun control initiatives.

• Not only is the continuous, non-episodic violence found in poor black communities not conducive to attracting social movements aimed at gun control, it often leads to racial stereotypes that further impede efforts to intervene to prevent it. For example, a study of urban public defenders found that as early as the 1960s, those workers had come to view crime and violence as more or less "normal" aspects of life on poor black urban communities. xiii Studies of both scholarly writings on black urban males and public perceptions of them have used the label of "criminalman" to describe prevailing views of black males and their criminality. xiv My earlier work has also described the extent to which such perceptions of black criminality serve as an impediment to efforts to intervene to prevent family violence in the black community. xv

• When viewed from the vantage point of policy making related to the prevention of gun violence, these latter observations also suggest the operation of a kind of race-of-victim effect based on calculations of the likelihood that intervention and prevention modalities will succeed. In many respects, they also reflect race-based assessments of the extent to which "victims contribute to their victimization." In his classic study of homicide in the 1940s and 50s Philadelphia, Marvin Wolfgang described some incidents of killing as "victim precipitated." He was clearly not making a distinction based on race but rather on the actions of the victim of any race before being killed. But, in the years that have followed and given the gang-linked "criminalman" depictions of black males, much of the violent victimization of young black males has come to be seen as in essence victim precipitated. xvi

• Thus, particularly when contrasted to the victims of mass killings committed by assault rifles, young black male victims of handguns sometimes tend to be viewed as a part of the problem and therefore "less worthy victims" or not truly victims. In individual cases, such descriptions clearly apply as Wolfgang accurately noted more than a half-century ago. Also, the well-documented cycles of retaliatory killings found among black and Latino gang members understandably detract from perceptions of the victim of such violence as
“harmless innocents.” But when such labeling is transformed to a group label for poor black or Latino males, it becomes a significant barrier to the devising of effective and meaningful strategies for preventing gun violence in those communities and those individuals within them who are most in need of such interventions. xvii

Back to the Future

My observations regarding the seeming intractability of race, racism and race effects in the study of youth violence are not designed to deter those meaningful and impactful efforts to reduce the destructive levels of gun violence found in economically disadvantaged communities of color. Instead, my observations are designed to encourage the questioning of those race-linked blinders in public responses to youth violence that derive from racialized perceptions of the causes and correlates of violence. Gun control is not a cure-all for the ills that lead to violence in poor communities of color. However, unfettered access to guns is not just a problem that drives those mass killings, typically at the hands of young to middle-aged white males, which periodically strike our nation. Such uninterrupted access also lies at the heart of the cycles of gun violence found in disadvantaged neighborhoods as well. Effective gun control policy must engage all communities and fully engage both of these forms of gun violence.

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These and similar unreferenced dates and statistics dispersed throughout my discussion are treated as common knowledge in some instances or as information easily obtained and fact checked by through internet portals.


My own work and that of many others have suggested that by ignoring or under-analyzing crime and violence among whites in small town and rural America we are left with an inaccurate portrait of the extent of racial disparity and perhaps also of the effects of economic deprivation on violence and other harms. For example, the current epidemic of opioid and heroin overdose deaths among the white underclass in an increasingly de-industrialized small towns and counties in the U.S. suggests the need to aim for greater disaggregation of our data.

It is clear that youths of color are frequently involved in school shootings, especially during turf battles linked to gangs. But, many of such altercations occur near school grounds/buildings as opposed to being within them. In addition, they are more likely to be single victim incidents.


Police killings of young black males reflect at times, as many have noted, a tendency to view all black males as offenders or those "waiting in line to become offenders".