

A Historical Description of Black Homicide and Suicide Differentials in the United States: 1950-86

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Homicide and, increasingly, suicide have become serious public health and political problems in the black community. Homicide disproportionately affects certain ethnic and racial groups (Holinger, 1987). Nonwhites, in particular blacks, are more likely than whites to be both victims and offenders. Homicide data collected by the National Centers for Health Statistics show that, in 1986, the homicide rate for blacks was 32.4 per 100,000 population; for whites, it was 5.8 per 100,000. Clearly, one can see that the homicide rate for blacks in the United States is much higher than that for whites. More important, homicide has become the leading cause of death for black males aged 15-19 (Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1989).

Another "crime" which is beginning to plague the black community is suicide. Historically, blacks have had lower rates of suicide than the general population (Holinger, 1987). However, during the last several years there has been an upsurge in the suicide rate among blacks in the United States. Specifically, since 1970, the rate of increase in suicides among blacks has outpaced that of whites. For example, between 1970 and 1980 there was a slight decrease (3.4 percent) in the overall suicide rate. For blacks, however, there was a 6.0 percent increase after adjusting for the age and sex composition of the population (See Tables 8-11). Two important points should be made at this juncture: (1) even with the increase in suicide among blacks it is still significantly lower than that of whites, and (2) the majority of the increase among blacks is

in the younger age groups. The second point is worthy of more attention because historically suicide has been more of a problem among the aged in society (Holinger, 1987). If both the homicide and suicide rates are disproportionately affecting young blacks and especially young black males, more research must be devoted to this area in an effort to ascertain what social forces are operating to produce this destructive behavior.

As was previously mentioned, both homicide and suicide represent serious public health and policy problems within the black community. Additionally, when one examines the potential number of years lost to these two acts, we discover that these violent behaviors exact a heavier toll than all causes of death with the exception of cardiovascular disease and cancer (Clayton, 1988; Holinger, 1987). The purpose of this paper is to examine both homicide and suicide in the United States to discern major patterns in the occurrence of each and to offer theoretical explanations for why the behaviors occur.

To accomplish this goal, historical epidemiological analyses of homicide and suicide will be employed. Additionally, we will briefly discuss the social causes and consequences of homicide and suicide by combining the epidemiological and theoretical approaches. In doing so, we hope to expound upon three critical issues:

1. What are the patterns of homicide and suicide in the black community with reference to age and sex? Do these patterns differ from patterns in the white population?
2. Do the prevailing theories concerning homicide and suicide have utility within the black community?
3. Given the problem of a large concentration of both homicides and suicides among black youth, how might this trend be reversed?

Changes in the Incidence and Rate of Homicide

For a society that boasts of individual freedom, the dignity and safety of its citizens, and responsibility, the statistics on violent acts in the United States are appalling.

Milton E. Eisenhower (The Eisenhower Foundation)

The preceding quotation accurately describes violence in America and how many react to this problem. Violence has been an American tradition since the founding of the country with the subjugation of the Native Americans and the cruel and brutal treatment given African slaves. Many Americans argue that we, as a nation, have moved beyond such treatment of racial and ethnic minorities and violence in any form cannot be condoned. Moreover, in recent years there has been public outcry over the extremely high rates of violence in American society. This public reaction to violent crime led to President Johnson's creation of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, in 1968.

This committee concluded that America was the most violent of the industrialized countries and that the period of the 1960s was the most violent in United States history. Even though the country focused its attention on the growing violent crime problem as early as 1968, the rate and incidence of violent crime in the United States still remains extremely high in comparison with other world powers. If we were to disaggregate violent crime into its four major components: (1) homicide, (2) rape, (3) aggravated assault, and (4) robbery, we would discover that Americans are almost as fearful of homicide as of the other violent offenses even though homicide is a relatively rare occurrence for most Americans when compared with the other violent crimes. Because homicide evokes fear in the populace and because of its high concentration in the black community, the following sections will discuss this crime, its occurrence and possible theoretical explanations.

Between 1950 and 1986 approximately 535,714 individuals were murdered in the United States. More specifically, of the total number of homicide victims during this time period, 263,487, or 49 percent were nonwhite, with the vast majority being black Americans. For this 37-year period, the mean number of homicides for whites in any given year is 7,358; for blacks, the mean is 7,121. What is especially alarming about the preceding statistics is that black Americans account for over 90 percent of the nonwhite homicide victims, or roughly half of all homicide victims, and during the period under investigation, blacks never exceeded 15 percent of the population.

The disproportionate rate of homicide among black Americans has been well documented in the literature; however, comprehensive explanations about this phenomenon are fairly limited. Social scientists as early as the 1930s attempted to address the issue of differential rates of homicide based on race and socioeconomic status, but neglected the investigations without developing adequate theories or explanations (Hawkins, 1987). However, these pioneering efforts did lead to some findings and theories worthy of mentioning at this juncture.

The major sociological theories of crime and especially violent crime have attempted to link criminal activity with socioeconomic status (Hackney, 1969; Wolfgang, 1958; Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). These early studies specifically addressed the issues of poverty, income inequality and place of residence as correlates to crime. In essence, these pioneering works dealing with homicide and other violent crimes were in the tradition of works done by Shaw (1929), Shulman (1931), Sellin (1938), and Miller (1979). Each of the preceding researchers suggested that rates of crime were directly related to social class with the members of lower socioeconomic strata having higher rates of crime than members of the upper strata. In addition to raising the issue of poverty and other forms of economic deprivation, the preceding researchers were quick to note that, in virtually all societies, there are many situational,

structural and subcultural conditions associated with individuals in the lower strata that positively reinforce interpersonal violence (Clinard & Quinney, 1973: 37; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967; Reckless, 1973).

Wolfgang in his study of homicide in Philadelphia suggested that variables associated with socioeconomic status were not sufficient to explain the homicide differentials between blacks and whites. In an effort to explain differential rates of homicide based on race, Wolfgang and Ferracuti advanced the theory of sub-cultural patterns of violence (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). Their theory argued that many Americans live in social, economic and cultural situations which condone, if not in fact produce, violent behavior. The primary model advanced by these scholars include the causal mechanisms of weak internal controls, failure to delay gratification and various other formulations associated with a value system. On balance, this subcultural argument suggests that the primary impetus of violent crime lies within the individual's value system.

Moynihan (1965) and Wilson (1975) argued a point very similar to the subcultural theory of Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967). Both Wilson and Moynihan linked violent crime to the anomic conditions generated by poor urban living conditions. They viewed these conditions as a generator of tensions between the interest of the collective conscience and the individual self interest. Wilson and Moynihan further argue that this might explain in part, the high crime rates found in inner-city neighborhoods as being the result of the inhabitants inability to become integrated into the dominant value system. Once the dominant value system is rejected an alternative system replaces it which does not view interpersonal violence in and of itself as being wrong.

In brief the basic propositions underlying the subcultural approach to violence may be summarized as follows: (1) rates of violence are higher among lower socioeconomic individuals and are committed largely as a result of class and other interpersonal conflicts; and (2) that lower economic classes are more violent than the upper classes in general because they have not adopted a value system (subculture) which views violence and the use of force as negative. When these two propositions are considered jointly, it can be assumed that blacks are more violent than whites because of their overrepresentation among the lower socioeconomic strata.

As the preceding discussion has shown, subcultural theorists argue that the value system of an individual is the major predictor variable in the etiology of crime. However, this value system is developed as a result of prolonged exposure to a discriminatory and inequitable social and economic system. Hence, subcultural theories of crime causation are inextricably tied into structural or class arguments which suggest that the inequitable and discriminatory allocation of scarce resources is directly related to high crime rates (Quinney, 1973). The following quotation by Wolfgang may make the preceding statement more salient.

Table 1. Homicide Victims and Rates by Race: 1950-1986

| Year | Homicide Victims | | Homicide Rates | |
|------|------------------|--------|----------------|--------------------|
| | White | Black | White | Black ^a |
| 1950 | 3,538 | 4,340 | 2.7 | 30.3 |
| 1951 | 3,363 | 4,063 | 2.5 | 28.3 |
| 1952 | 3,502 | 4,455 | 2.5 | 28.1 |
| 1953 | 3,425 | 4,124 | 2.5 | 25.5 |
| 1954 | 3,399 | 4,057 | 2.5 | 25.1 |
| 1955 | 3,442 | 4,255 | 2.3 | 23.0 |
| 1956 | 3,383 | 4,158 | 2.3 | 23.7 |
| 1957 | 3,444 | 4,197 | 2.3 | 22.9 |
| 1958 | 3,651 | 4,074 | 2.6 | 22.1 |
| 1959 | 3,856 | 4,214 | 2.5 | 22.2 |
| 1960 | 3,986 | 4,358 | 2.5 | 22.2 |
| 1961 | 4,174 | 4,308 | 2.6 | 21.3 |
| 1962 | 4,228 | 4,475 | 2.7 | 22.4 |
| 1963 | 4,299 | 4,615 | 2.7 | 22.4 |
| 1964 | 4,634 | 5,074 | 2.8 | 23.3 |
| 1965 | 5,039 | 5,673 | 3.0 | 23.3 |
| 1966 | 5,382 | 6,224 | 3.2 | 27.1 |
| 1967 | 6,212 | 7,213 | 3.6 | 30.8 |
| 1968 | 6,806 | 7,701 | 3.9 | 33.1 |
| 1969 | 7,016 | 8,233 | 4.0 | 34.9 |
| 1970 | 7,803 | 9,045 | 4.5 | 36.6 |
| 1971 | 17,537 | 10,226 | 4.8 | 40.8 |
| 1972 | 8,976 | 10,662 | 4.8 | 41.8 |
| 1973 | 9,986 | 10,479 | 5.6 | 40.2 |
| 1974 | 10,648 | 10,817 | 5.9 | 40.9 |
| 1975 | 10,973 | 10,337 | 6.0 | 38.2 |
| 1976 | 10,115 | 9,439 | 5.5 | 34.2 |
| 1977 | 10,738 | 9,230 | 4.8 | 32.8 |
| 1978 | 11,200 | 9,232 | 6.1 | 32.2 |
| 1979 | 12,334 | 9,812 | 6.5 | 37.9 |
| 1980 | 13,558 | 10,283 | 7.0 | 38.6 |
| 1981 | 13,066 | 10,137 | 6.6 | 37.3 |
| 1982 | 12,439 | 9,473 | 8.9 | 43.5 |
| 1983 | 11,235 | 8,494 | 5.6 | 30.3 |
| 1984 | 11,127 | 8,240 | 7.1 | 39.7 |
| 1985 | 11,163 | 8,282 | 7.3 | 39.7 |
| 1986 | 11,690 | 9,495 | 5.8 | 32.4 |

Source: Homicide victims—U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States* (Homicide Rates 1950-1960) Grove, R.D. and Hetzel, A.M., *Vital Statistics in the United States 1940-1960*, Table 63, p. 374. Homicide rates 1961-84. Holinger, Paul C. *Violent Deaths in the United States* (New York: The Guilford Press), pp. 207-108. Homicide rates 1985-86 *Vital Statistics of the United States* (annuals). Tables 1-9, p. 36

^aHomicide rates for 1950-78 include blacks and other nonwhites; 1979-86 include blacks only.

If a careful detached scholar knew nothing about crime rates but was aware of the social, economic and political disparities between whites and Negroes in the United States, and if this diligent researcher had prior knowledge of the historical status of the American Negro, what would be the most plausible hypothesis our scholar could make about the crime rates of the Negroes? Even this small amount of relevant knowledge would justify the expectation that Negroes would be found to have a higher crime rate than whites (1958:31).

As was mentioned in passing, subcultural arguments are implicitly tied into class or structural arguments. Moreover, with regard to homicide, several recent developments lead one to question the utility of these theories. First, it appears that high homicide rates are correlated with poor economic outlooks. Secondly, in recent years, white homicide rates have increased. Both these occurrences will be discussed in subsequent sections. However, if homicide rates are determined by economic fluctuations for both black and whites - where does culture or value systems fit in? In an attempt to answer this question economic, and demographic changes in America during the 1970s deserve attention.

An examination of the data in Table 1 shows that the decade of the 1970s was a period during which the black homicide rates were at their highest. This decade marked the first time that the black homicide rate exceeded 40 per 100,000. After 1974, the black homicide rate began to level off and did not reach 40 per 100,000 again until 1982. Several researchers suggest that the changes in the economy during this period may help explain the increases in homicide (Parker & Smith, 1979). For example, during the late 1960s and 1970s, blacks were disproportionately affected by four cycles of recession (Hill, 1987). In essence, before blacks could recover from one economic tragedy they were confronted by another round of record-level unemployment and double-digit inflation. Not only did homicide increase during this period, but predatory crimes increased as well.

Parker and Smith were not the only researchers to posit a positive relationship between economic changes and homicide. Heller (1983) argued that rises in the unemployment rate are associated with increases in homicide. Along this same line, Clayton (1983) showed that the vast majority of violent offenders were either unemployed or underemployed immediately preceding the commission of a felony. Other studies by Blau and Blau (1982), Smith and Parker (1980) and Sampson (1985) also show increases in poverty to be related to high homicide rates. But the question remains as to why the black homicide rate increased so rapidly during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As was mentioned earlier, Parker and Smith (1979) placed the increase directly on the economic changes in America. Let us see exactly what happened in black America during these years.

The data in Table 2 show that blacks actually fared better in terms of employment prior to 1954. After the year 1954 the ratio of black to white unem-

**Table 2. Unemployment Rates by Race for Persons
Sixteen Years and Over, 1948-1983**

| Year | Unemployment Rate | | Ratio of Black and Other Races to White |
|------|--------------------------|-------|---|
| | Black and Other Races | White | |
| 1948 | 5.9 | 3.5 | 1.69 |
| 1949 | 8.9 | 5.6 | 1.59 |
| 1950 | 9.0 | 4.9 | 1.84 |
| 1951 | 5.3 | 3.1 | 1.71 |
| 1952 | 5.4 | 2.8 | 1.93 |
| 1953 | 4.5 | 2.7 | 1.67 |
| 1954 | 9.9 | 5.0 | 1.98 |
| 1955 | 8.7 | 2.9 | 1.23 |
| 1956 | 8.3 | 3.6 | 2.30 |
| 1957 | 7.9 | 3.8 | 1.07 |
| 1958 | 12.6 | 6.1 | 2.07 |
| 1959 | 10.7 | 4.8 | 2.33 |
| 1960 | 10.2 | 4.9 | 2.08 |
| 1961 | 12.4 | 6.0 | 2.07 |
| 1962 | 10.9 | 4.9 | 2.22 |
| 1963 | 10.8 | 5.0 | 2.16 |
| 1964 | 9.6 | 4.6 | 2.09 |
| 1965 | 8.1 | 4.1 | 1.98 |
| 1966 | 7.3 | 3.3 | 2.21 |
| 1967 | 7.4 | 3.4 | 2.17 |
| 1968 | 6.7 | 3.1 | 2.06 |
| 1969 | 6.4 | 3.1 | 2.06 |
| 1970 | 8.2 | 4.5 | 1.82 |
| 1971 | 9.9 | 5.4 | 1.83 |
| 1972 | 10.0 | 5.0 | 2.00 |
| 1973 | 8.9 | 4.3 | 2.07 |
| 1974 | 9.9 | 5.0 | 1.98 |
| 1975 | 14.8 | 7.8 | 1.90 |
| 1976 | 14.0 | 7.0 | 2.00 |
| 1977 | 14.0 | 6.2 | 2.25 |
| 1978 | 12.8 | 5.2 | 2.46 |
| 1979 | 12.3 | 5.1 | 2.41 |
| 1980 | 14.3 | 6.3 | 2.27 |
| 1981 | 15.6 | 6.7 | 2.33 |
| 1982 | 18.9 | 8.6 | 2.19 |
| 1983 | 19.5 | 8.4 | 2.32 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States, 1974, Current Population Reports*, Series P-23, no. 48 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975).

Note: The unemployment rate is the percentage of the civilian labor force that is unemployed.

**Table 3. Unemployment Rates by Race for Persons
Sixteen to Nineteen Years old, 1954-1983**

| Unemployment Rate—Ratio of 16-19 | | | | Unemployment Rate—Ratio of 20-24 | | | |
|----------------------------------|----------|-------|----------------------|----------------------------------|-------|-------|----------------------|
| Year | Nonwhite | White | Nonwhite to White | Year | Black | White | Nonwhite to White |
| 1954 | 16.5 | 12.1 | 1.37 | 1954 | 16.9 | 9.8 | 1.72 |
| 1955 | 15.8 | 10.3 | 1.53 | 1955 | 12.4 | 7.0 | 1.77 |
| 1956 | 18.2 | 10.2 | 1.78 | 1956 | 12.0 | 6.1 | 1.97 |
| 1957 | 19.1 | 10.6 | 1.80 | 1957 | 12.7 | 7.1 | 1.79 |
| 1958 | 27.4 | 14.4 | 1.90 | 1958 | 19.5 | 11.7 | 1.67 |
| 1959 | 26.1 | 13.1 | 1.99 | 1959 | 16.3 | 7.5 | 2.17 |
| 1960 | 24.4 | 13.4 | 1.82 | 1960 | 13.1 | 8.3 | 1.58 |
| 1961 | 27.6 | 15.3 | 1.80 | 1961 | 15.3 | 10.0 | 1.53 |
| 1962 | 25.1 | 13.3 | 1.89 | 1962 | 14.6 | 8.0 | 1.82 |
| 1963 | 30.4 | 15.5 | 2.96 | 1963 | 15.5 | 7.8 | 1.99 |
| 1964 | 27.2 | 14.8 | 1.84 | 1964 | 12.6 | 7.4 | 1.70 |
| 1965 | 26.2 | 13.4 | 1.96 | 1965 | 9.3 | 5.9 | 1.58 |
| 1966 | 25.4 | 11.2 | 2.26 | 1966 | 7.9 | 4.1 | 1.93 |
| 1967 | 26.5 | 11.0 | 2.41 | 1967 | 8.0 | 4.2 | 1.91 |
| 1968 | 25.0 | 11.0 | 2.27 | 1968 | 8.3 | 4.6 | 1.80 |
| 1969 | 24.1 | 10.7 | 2.25 | 1969 | 10.0 | 5.0 | 2.00 |
| 1970 | 29.1 | 13.5 | 2.16 | 1970 | 12.6 | 7.8 | 1.62 |
| 1971 | 31.7 | 15.1 | 2.10 | 1971 | 16.2 | 9.4 | 1.73 |
| 1972 | 33.5 | 14.2 | 2.36 | 1972 | 14.7 | 8.5 | 1.73 |
| 1973 | 30.2 | 12.6 | 2.37 | 1973 | 12.6 | 6.5 | 1.94 |
| 1974 | 32.9 | 14.0 | 2.35 | 1974 | 15.4 | 7.8 | 1.97 |
| 1975 | 39.5 | 17.9 | 2.20 | 1975 | 22.9 | 13.2 | 1.73 |
| 1976 | 30.3 | 16.9 | 2.32 | 1976 | 10.7 | 10.9 | 1.90 |
| 1977 | 41.1 | 15.4 | 2.67 | 1977 | 21.7 | 9.3 | 2.33 |
| 1978 | 38.7 | 13.9 | 2.78 | 1978 | 10.0 | 7.6 | 2.63 |
| 1979 | 36.5 | 14.0 | 2.61 | 1979 | 17.0 | 7.4 | 2.30 |
| 1980 | 38.5 | 15.5 | 2.48 | 1980 | 23.6 | 10.4 | 2.27 |
| 1981 | 41.4 | 17.3 | 2.39 | 1981 | 26.4 | 10.4 | 2.54 |
| 1982 | 48.0 | 20.4 | 2.35 | 1982 | 30.6 | 12.8 | 2.39 |
| 1983 | 48.5 | 19.3 | 2.51 | 1983 | 31.6 | 12.1 | 2.61 |

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Handbook of Labor Statistics (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985).

ployment began to increase with an approximate unemployment ratio of 2:1 in years after 1954. Wilson (1978) argued that after 1954 unemployment became a chronic problem for black Americans. If we were to disaggregate the total unemployment rate into the functional age groups which correspond to the highest homicide age groups we get the following picture (see Table 3). Young black males have an unemployment rate that more than doubles that of their white counterparts. What is even more troubling is the teenage unemploy-

ment rate among our black youth. The ratio of unemployment disparity is greatest among the age group 16-19 than any of the other age groups.

The data in Tables 2 and 3 show that during the period of the 1960s and 1970s the differential between black and white youth was at a, heretofore, unprecedented high. These data lend support to the hypothesis that high levels of homicide are related to high levels of unemployment. Moreover, as the data in Tables 2 and 3 have shown, life for many blacks in the 1960s and 1970s was hard in terms of economic progress. These decades were hard for all blacks, however, young, uneducated males were most at risk, and this risk factor was reflected in the crime rates, especially homicide (Caplovitz, 1981).

James Q. Wilson (1977) in his somewhat controversial book *Thinking About Crime* makes the argument that the sixties was a period of plenty and still the crime rate soared. However, as the preceding data show, for young black males who contribute disproportionately to the homicide rate, this was a decade of a widening income and employment gap between black and whites. Not to be misled, many blacks saw their economic position increase in terms of income, however, the gap between middle income blacks and low income blacks grew (Blackwell, 1985).

Black males have historically contributed disproportionately to the overall homicide rate (see Tables 1 and 4). Until 1976, black males had both higher rates and absolute numbers of homicide. When the population of the United States is disaggregated into the four major population subgroups shown in Table 4, black males, followed by black females, have the highest homicide rates. White females consistently have the lowest homicide rates of any of the four groups.

These data do reveal one interesting trend, between 1950 and 1986 the white homicide rate more than doubled. Also, the racial characteristics of homicide victims began to change beginning in the 1970s. Specifically, in 1970, 9,045 blacks were homicide victims, which represented 54 percent of the total victims. In 1978, blacks represented 45 percent of all homicide victims, a decrease of 9 percent in the 8-year period. As the data in Tables 1 and 4 show, the percentage increase in the white homicide rate was reflected among both females and males. Among blacks, the rate of increase in homicide between 1950 and 1986 was significant at times but, on average, showed a lower increase than that experienced by whites. What do the preceding statistics actually mean is a question which has confronted social scientists since the mid-seventies. In essence, why did the homicide rate continue to increase among whites during the 1970s when it decreased for blacks? One explanation frequently given for the increase in the white homicide rate is changes in the economic structure which have been shown to affect the black homicide rate as well.

Table 4: Homicide Victims and Rates by Race and Sex: 1950-1986

| Year | Homicide Victims | | | | Homicide Rates | | | |
|------|------------------|--------|-------|--------|----------------|--------|-------|--------|
| | White | | Black | | White | | Black | |
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| 1950 | 2,586 | 952 | 3,450 | 890 | 3.9 | 1.4 | 45.5 | 11.2 |
| 1951 | 2,421 | 942 | 3,193 | 870 | 3.6 | 1.4 | 41.3 | 10.7 |
| 1952 | 2,562 | 940 | 3,570 | 885 | 3.7 | 1.3 | 45.4 | 10.8 |
| 1953 | 2,449 | 976 | 3,308 | 816 | 3.5 | 1.4 | 41.3 | 9.6 |
| 1954 | 2,477 | 922 | 3,191 | 866 | 3.5 | 1.4 | 40.6 | 9.5 |
| 1955 | 2,439 | 1,003 | 3,409 | 846 | 3.4 | 1.2 | 36.5 | 9.5 |
| 1956 | 2,421 | 962 | 3,219 | 939 | 3.3 | 1.3 | 37.1 | 10.3 |
| 1957 | 2,426 | 1,018 | 3,313 | 884 | 3.2 | 1.3 | 36.5 | 9.2 |
| 1958 | 2,555 | 1,096 | 3,181 | 893 | 3.8 | 1.4 | 34.9 | 9.3 |
| 1959 | 2,716 | 1,140 | 3,281 | 933 | 3.5 | 1.4 | 35.0 | 9.4 |
| 1960 | 2,832 | 1,154 | 3,345 | 1,013 | 3.6 | 1.4 | 34.5 | 9.9 |
| 1961 | 2,903 | 1,271 | 3,370 | 938 | 3.6 | 1.5 | 33.6 | 8.9 |
| 1962 | 2,937 | 1,291 | 3,548 | 927 | 3.8 | 1.6 | 35.5 | 8.9 |
| 1963 | 3,060 | 1,239 | 3,650 | 965 | 3.9 | 1.5 | 35.7 | 9.1 |
| 1964 | 3,261 | 1,373 | 4,026 | 1,048 | 3.9 | 1.6 | 37.4 | 9.2 |
| 1965 | 3,660 | 1,379 | 4,488 | 1,185 | 4.4 | 1.6 | 40.1 | 10.0 |
| 1966 | 3,785 | 1,597 | 4,955 | 1,280 | 4.5 | 1.8 | 43.5 | 10.6 |
| 1967 | 4,501 | 1,711 | 5,735 | 1,478 | 5.3 | 1.9 | 49.6 | 11.9 |
| 1968 | 4,501 | 1,699 | 6,236 | 1,458 | 5.9 | 1.9 | 54.6 | 11.6 |
| 1969 | 5,215 | 1,801 | 6,770 | 1,463 | 6.0 | 2.0 | 58.1 | 11.7 |
| 1970 | 5,865 | 1,938 | 7,413 | 1,632 | 6.8 | 2.1 | 60.8 | 12.3 |
| 1971 | 6,455 | 2,106 | 8,357 | 1,869 | 7.3 | 2.2 | 67.7 | 13.9 |
| 1972 | 6,820 | 2,156 | 8,822 | 1,840 | 7.3 | 2.3 | 70.1 | 13.4 |
| 1973 | 7,411 | 2,575 | 8,429 | 2,050 | 8.3 | 2.8 | 65.8 | 14.6 |
| 1974 | 7,992 | 2,656 | 8,755 | 2,062 | 8.9 | 2.8 | 67.2 | 14.5 |
| 1975 | 8,222 | 2,751 | 8,331 | 2,006 | 9.1 | 2.9 | 62.6 | 13.8 |
| 1976 | 7,568 | 2,547 | 7,574 | 1,865 | 8.3 | 2.7 | 55.8 | 12.5 |
| 1977 | 7,951 | 2,787 | 7,404 | 1,826 | 8.7 | 2.9 | 53.6 | 12.0 |
| 1978 | 8,429 | 2,771 | 7,409 | 1,823 | 9.2 | 2.9 | 52.6 | 11.8 |
| 1979 | 9,392 | 2,942 | 7,938 | 1,874 | 10.1 | 3.0 | 64.6 | 13.8 |
| 1980 | 10,381 | 3,177 | 8,385 | 1,898 | 10.9 | 3.2 | 66.6 | 13.5 |
| 1981 | 9,941 | 3,125 | 8,312 | 1,825 | 10.4 | 3.1 | 64.8 | 12.7 |
| 1982 | 9,260 | 3,179 | 7,730 | 1,743 | 13.9 | 4.0 | 78.6 | 14.6 |
| 1983 | 8,355 | 2,880 | 6,822 | 1,672 | 8.6 | 2.8 | 51.4 | 11.3 |
| 1984 | 8,171 | 2,956 | 6,563 | 1,677 | 11.2 | 3.1 | 70.1 | 14.6 |
| 1985 | 8,122 | 3,041 | 6,616 | 1,666 | 11.1 | 3.5 | 69.7 | 12.5 |
| 1986 | 8,567 | 3,123 | 7,634 | 1,861 | 8.6 | 3.0 | 55.0 | 12.1 |

Source: Homicide Victims: U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics of the United States (Homicide rates 1950-60). Grove, R.D. and Hetzel, A.M., Vital Statistics Rates in the United States 1940-1960, Table 63, p. 374. Vital Statistics of the United States (Homicide rates 1961-1986).

During the decade of the seventies more white youth were living below the poverty level than any other period of American history (Social Indicators, 1978). The increase in white youth poverty is tied to two closely related demographic changes which took place during the 'Seventies': (1) an increase in the number of white female headed households; and (2) a higher proportion of white youth in the 15-24 age group. Both of these changes were rooted in the 'baby boom' period. With reference to the change in number of white female-headed households, Sternlieb and Hughes (1978) show that there was a 26.6 percent increase for whites and a 51.6 percent increase for blacks for the period 1960 to 1970. Corresponding figures for the time span 1970-76 were 28.6 for whites and 48.6 for blacks. The number of black female-headed households declined while the white rate increased. These figures are important in the sense that female-headed households, on average, are poorer than either male-headed or married households. The Decade of the Seventies also witnessed the closing of many manufacturing facilities which had traditionally employed a high percentage of white working-class individuals. In the urban North-Central and Northeast regions of the United States many working-class whites were heavily concentrated in the heavy or durable manufacturing jobs mentioned above and quite often they were able to gain entree for their offsprings through union practices and favoritism of employers. When these jobs closed, both father and sons were left without employment and joined the ranks of the unemployed. To exacerbate this problem was a larger white youth cohort than preceding decades due to the high birth rate of the 'baby boom' period. Walker (1989:260) points out that between 1953 and 1984 the cities of New York, Philadelphia and St. Louis lost 1,007,000 manufacturing jobs. These cities are only mentioned to show the gravity of the changing occupational structure. The pattern depicted in these cities mirrored what was happening in all of the major manufacturing centers of the Northeast and North Central regions of the country. Blacks fared worst in the collapsing manufacturing section but whites also suffered.

Reports from the U.S. Department of Labor show that black occupational mobility in the 1970s outpaced that of whites. An examination of the income overlap between blacks and whites illustrates this point (Figure I).

| | |
|-------------|------|
| 1947 - 1952 | 62.6 |
| 1953 - 1959 | 64.8 |
| 1960 - 1965 | 66.8 |
| 1966 - 1973 | 73.1 |
| 1974 - 1977 | 76.0 |

The Department of Labor's explanation for this closing of the income gap is more whites competing for jobs and an overall lower productivity rate during the 1970s coupled with more blacks entering higher paying white collar jobs (Social Indicators, 1980). The argument can be made that increases in the white homicide rate are attributable to the same social and economic factors which have been related to high incidences of black homicide.

Nevertheless, the relative risk of dying from homicide remains over five times higher among blacks in the population. More specifically, the lifetime probability that a white will die from homicide is 1:240 as compared to 1:47 for black Americans.

Age and Homicide Victimization. As the preceding discussion succinctly shows, age is the variable that immediately surfaces as a predictor of homicide. Wolfgang's 1958 study of homicide in Philadelphia demonstrates that in 1952, 25- through 39-year-olds had the highest rates of homicide and that blacks tended to become victims at earlier ages (Wolfgang, 1958). Munford et al. (1976), Pokorny (1965) and Voss and Hepburn (1968) all demonstrate that younger age groups experience higher homicide rates than older age groups. These studies concurred with Wolfgang's initial research, which concluded that blacks and other nonwhites experiences higher homicide rates than whites.

As the data in Table 4 show, blacks experience higher homicide rates than whites regardless of gender. For example, black females have higher homicide rates than white males. However, homicide is not randomly distributed across age categories. As the preceding literature on homicide illustrates, younger age groups have historically experienced higher homicide rates than older groups, and blacks have higher rates of homicide and at younger ages than whites (Wolfgang, 1958; Munford et al., 1976; O'Carrol & Mercy, 1986).

The data in Table 5 present homicide data for selected years by functional age group and gender. What is apparent from these data is the fact that, for both blacks and whites, the younger age groups have higher homicide rates. In each of the age groups, blacks have higher rates than their white counterparts. Among black males, the critical age categories are 15-34. In 1980, black males between 25 and 34 had a homicide rate of 120.9 per 100,000 population. The comparable figure for white males was 18.9 per 100,000 population. The same trend is also applicable for females. Data provided by the Centers for Disease Control show that over 90 percent of homicides involve individuals under the age of 65.

Blacks are more likely than whites to be killed at younger ages. The data in Table 5 show that the critical age category for whites is 35-44 years of age. However, blacks have higher homicides rates than whites in all of the various age categories. With regard to gender, black females in the 25-34 age group also are more at risk than white females. As was the case with black males, the black female homicide rates exceed that of whites in all of the age groups. Fingerhut and Kleinman (1989) illustrate in their research that since 1968 homicide

has been the leading cause of death for black males 15 to 19 years of age.

The question posed at this juncture is why should the homicide rate be so high among young minority populations? Several researchers have addressed this question and offer varied and competing explanations. The prevailing explanations revolve around the subcultural and class arguments briefly discussed earlier.

Groups that are at an economic disadvantage are more likely to ignore legitimate authorities in attempting to resolve interpersonal disputes (Clayton, 1988). Lizotte and Loftin (1974) also find racial and economic differences in the approval of various types of violence. They demonstrate that those of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to approve of interpersonal violence than are those of higher socioeconomic status. Conversely, upper-class members are more likely to approve of legitimate violence, that is, force exerted by police.

This differential acceptance of violence may be suggestive of a value system in operation among some blacks which views interpersonal violence as an appropriate mechanism of conflict resolution. Extending this argument to young blacks in American society, we have seen that this population subgroup is the most economically disenfranchised group in the United States. Given their widespread joblessness and corresponding poverty it is easy to see how many would abandon the traditional routes associated with economic mobility.

Hill (1987) suggested that American society is structured in a fashion which oppresses minority youth. Blacks with comparable skills are treated differently than whites. For many black Americans, life is marked by limited mobility, dilapidated housing, and insufficient income. These harsh environmental conditions are the seedbed of hostility, and the risk of interpersonal violence is high. Individuals trapped in these oppressive environs are likely to strike out at those close to them (proximity and class). This phenomenon is referred to in the social-psychological literature as displaced aggression.

Another social-psychological argument which is closely related to the displaced aggression theory is the frustration-aggression hypothesis. This hypothesis holds that aggression is heightened when avenues to desired goals are blocked. This blockage leads to frustration which in turn leads to aggressive behavior. When these two formulations are coupled with the preceding economic arguments the following explanation for high youth homicide seems plausible.

Young black men have accepted the larger society's view of success, however in attempting to achieve these socially desired goals, many blacks have been blocked by structural barriers. Dennis (1977) argued that the unusually high rate of homicide among young blacks is the result of stress produced by limited employment and other structural changes in the black community. In essence, homicide is a reaction to the stress produced by constantly having the legitimate avenues for success blocked. Somewhat related to Dennis' (1977) research is Fanon's (1967) assertion that intraracial aggression is actually

repressed or displaced aggression aimed at the dominant society. Fanon suggested that only revolt against the ruling group would reduce intraracial hostility. If these hypotheses by Dennis and Fanon are correct, we would expect violence among blacks to be higher in areas where discrimination and poverty are highest. Hence, blacks living in the southern regions of the United States and in inner cities, which are characterized by poverty and limited upward mobility, should have higher homicide rates than whites and middle-class blacks. There is some agreement in the research literature which shows that when socioeconomic status is controlled, the difference between black and white homicide differentials disappear (Freeman, 1983; Hill, 1987).

Homicide by Region. In a 1985 report on homicide, prepared by the Centers for Disease Control, it was demonstrated that the South had the highest rates of homicide in the nation. In addition, the report shows that the 10 states with the highest homicide rate are all located in the southern United States. These findings give a measure of credibility to the southern-subculture-of-violence argument, which has been around since the 1950s. This theory argues that Southerners are more likely to use violence than individuals in other regions of the country because of their long history regarding the belief and use of force. This logic is extended to suggest that southern blacks are more violent than others because of their heritage, coupled with the low economic conditions associated with the South. However, recent re-examination of these data by O'Carrol and Mercy (1986), who disaggregated the population by race, shows somewhat different results. Their data are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Homicide Rates by Geographic Region of Occurrence and Race of Victim, United States, 1980

| | White | Black | Total |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|
| United States | 6.8 | 38.4 | 10.6 |
| Northeast | 5.2 | 36.0 | 8.2 |
| North Central | 4.3 | 46.6 | 8.1 |
| South | 8.9 | 33.7 | 13.5 |
| West | 9.2 | 50.3 | 11.4 |

Source: O'Carrol, Patrick W. and Mercy, James (1986). Homicide Rates by Geographic Region in Damell R. Hawkins (Ed.), *Homicide Among Black Americans*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.

As the data in Table 6 show, the South has the highest overall homicide rate when compared to other regions. However, different patterns surface for race-specific homicide rates. Among blacks, the highest homicide rates are found

in the West and North Central. In fact, the southern region had the lowest rate, 33.7. On the other hand, there was very little difference between the homicide rates in the West and South for whites. Given the fact that 53 percent of the black population resides in the South and blacks have much higher homicide rates than whites, when the two groups are pooled the South has the highest crude homicide rate. These findings appear to refute research that finds a "southern" difference in homicide rates (Hackney, 1969; Loftin & Hill, 1974). As stated above, over 53 percent of the black population resides in the South. Given this fact, an analysis of homicide in the 13 southern states was conducted. The results are presented in Table 7. These data show that Mississippi had the highest percentage of black homicide among the 13 southern states. If the District of Columbia is treated as a separate unit of analysis, it would lead in the percentage total homicide that is black, with a figure of 89.4. The data in Table 7 show that only in states with relatively small black populations did whites exceed blacks in total and percentage of homicide. Specifically, the states of West Virginia, Delaware, Tennessee, Florida, and Kentucky had white homicides that totaled over 50 percent of the total. The analysis of homicide by region illustrates an important point: states with low median incomes have higher than average homicide rates for both black and whites. Specifically, southern states are below the national average in income and their homicide rates are also above the average.

Table 7. Number and Percentages of Homicide Victims by Race and Sex, 1979-81

| State | White | | Black | | Male | | Female | | Total No. |
|-------------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|--------|------|--------------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | |
| Alabama | 667 | 39.4 | 1025 | 60.5 | 1330 | 78.5 | 364 | 21.5 | 1694 |
| Delaware | 76 | 60.3 | 50 | 39.7 | 79 | 62.7 | 47 | 37.3 | 126 |
| D.C. | 56 | 9.9 | 507 | 89.4 | 455 | 80.2 | 112 | 19.8 | 567 |
| Florida | 2427 | 57.5 | 1786 | 42.3 | 3277 | 77.6 | 945 | 22.4 | 4222 |
| Georgia | 975 | 39.6 | 1480 | 60.1 | 1890 | 76.7 | 574 | 23.3 | 2464 |
| Kentucky | 775 | 78.3 | 215 | 21.7 | 778 | 78.6 | 212 | 21.4 | 990 |
| Maryland | 406 | 33.9 | 782 | 65.3 | 864 | 72.1 | 334 | 27.9 | 1198 |
| Mississippi | 330 | 31.5 | 711 | 68.0 | 830 | 79.3 | 216 | 20.7 | 1046 |
| N. Carolina | 922 | 47.8 | 954 | 49.5 | 1501 | 77.8 | 428 | 22.2 | 1929 |
| S. Carolina | 485 | 43.5 | 629 | 56.4 | 872 | 78.1 | 244 | 21.9 | 1116 |
| Tennessee | 815 | 53.8 | 700 | 46.2 | 1203 | 79.4 | 313 | 20.6 | 1516 |
| Virginia | 759 | 51.4 | 707 | 47.9 | 1076 | 72.9 | 401 | 27.1 | 1477 |
| W. Virginia | 368 | 86.0 | 58 | 13.6 | 323 | 75.5 | 105 | 24.5 | 428 |
| Total | 9061 | 48.3 | 9604 | 51.2 | 14478 | 77.1 | 4295 | 22.9 | 18773 |

Source: National Center for Health Statistics published (1940-160) and unpublished tables (1961-1981).

Summary Statement

The preceding discussion has shown that homicide in America is indeed a serious problem and one which has remained fairly constant during the period of 1950 to 1986. The data presented in this section of the paper have shown that blacks have higher rates of homicide than whites, but during the decade of the seventies the black rate began to decline while white rates showed a steady increase. We argue that homicide is positively related to poor economic conditions for both blacks and whites and that the increase in white homicide rates is indicative of an economic cause of homicide. In essence, white homicide rates increased during a period when whites were faced with economic problems of unparalleled dimensions. Given these findings, subcultural arguments provide little utility in explaining homicide in the United States.

One area which has not been discussed previously in this paper, but which deserves mentioning, is the relationship between gun ownership and homicide. This point is extremely critical given the increasing use of firearms by young black gang members. Many researchers suggest that the high homicide rate among black males is due to the availability of guns in the black neighborhoods. The U.S. National Commission on the Causes and the Prevention of Violence (1969) demonstrated that gun sales quadrupled during the 1960s. Other studies show that guns account for over two-thirds of all homicides (Center for Disease Control, 1985). There is a clear relationship between gun ownership and use and criminal homicide within the black community. Farley (1980) argues that the increase in black homicide during the 1960s and 1970s can be explained entirely by the variable of handguns and long guns. Moreover, he states that if homicide was eliminated as a cause of death, black men could expect to live approximately 1.5 years longer.

Suicide: A Growing Problem for Blacks

The preceding section of this paper addressed the issue of homicide in the black community and showed that indeed homicide poses serious problems for blacks. Now we would like to draw your attention to a growing problem, but one which has received little popular or scholarly attention in the black community—suicide.

Emile Durkheim's (1951) early work on suicide is regarded by many as the definitive investigation in the area. However, researchers prior to Durkheim and since his research have been interested in suicide. Jean Baechier (1979) argues that suicide is the most widely studied human behavior and one which has been researched by almost all of the academic disciplines. The question posed at this juncture is why are academicians and the general public so fascinated with suicide? One answer to the preceding question is the fact that most

individuals and cultures seek to prolong life and view the taking of one's own life as one of the most unnatural of all acts. Even though most cultures and societies abhor suicide, thousands of individuals take their lives each day.

Suicide is a problem that is international in scope and a problem which has generated a vast amount of research. However, there exists very little consensus among scholars as to why some individuals are more prone to suicide than others. Also, there are many studies which suggest that women and blacks are less likely to commit suicide than are men and whites, but there is no universally accepted reason for why these differences exist. Therefore, this section of the paper will offer theoretical explanations for the historically low rates of suicide in the black community and offer some reasons for the contemporary increases in the rate of suicide among blacks.

Suicide was the eighth leading cause of death in the United States in 1986, 1987 and the 12-month period from October 1, 1987, to September 30, 1988 (MMWR, 1989a). Table 8 shows the number of suicide victims for whites and blacks for the years 1950-86. Several noteworthy patterns are clear. Generally, the number of suicide victims for both blacks and whites steadily increased between 1950-86. While the increase was much more pronounced among whites than blacks, suicide among both blacks and whites peaked during the last year of this period reaching an unprecedented high in 1986. This upsurge in black suicide has prompted growing concern. Another pattern garnered from the data is the substantial difference in suicide rates by race. Whites suicide rates are generally at least twice as high as blacks and nonwhites. It does appear, however, that the disparity has lessened over time.

Previous research has shown that in Western culture suicide is higher among those with lower income, the unemployed, those less educated, and those living in cities (DeCatanzaro, 1981:35). Low and his research associates (1981), for instance, found that unemployment helped to explain changes in suicide rates, especially among men. Hendin (1982:88) has pointed out that with black suicide, "one is dealing basically with a problem of the ghetto, that is, with the poorest socioeconomic group among the black population." Several studies have found inverse relationships between socioeconomic status (SES) and suicide (Sainsbury, 1963; Gardner, et al., 1964; Weiss, 1968; Maris, 1969; Lyons, 1985). Furthermore, in Western culture, generally, and the United States in particular, suicide is higher among the divorced and separated (DeCatanzaro, 1981:35 & 52) and Protestants (Choron, 1972:67).¹ In the United States, because more blacks and other minorities fall into these categories than do whites, lower suicide rates among blacks than whites may be surprising.

¹Protestants have higher rates than Catholics.

Table 8. Suicide Victims and Rates by Race: 1950-86

| Year | Suicide Victims | | Suicide Rates | |
|------|-----------------|-------|---------------|--------------------|
| | White | Black | White | Black ^a |
| 1950 | 16,468 | 577 | 12.2 | 4.3 |
| 1951 | 15,292 | 558 | 11.1 | 4.1 |
| 1952 | 14,963 | 507 | 10.8 | 3.7 |
| 1953 | 15,307 | 515 | 10.8 | 3.8 |
| 1954 | 15,652 | 602 | 10.9 | 4.1 |
| 1955 | 16,092 | 557 | 11.0 | 3.8 |
| 1956 | 16,034 | 568 | 10.8 | 3.8 |
| 1957 | 15,878 | 619 | 10.5 | 4.0 |
| 1958 | 17,684 | 686 | 11.5 | 4.4 |
| 1959 | 17,719 | 779 | 11.3 | 4.6 |
| 1960 | 18,121 | 741 | 11.4 | 4.5 |
| 1961 | 18,012 | 781 | 11.2 | 4.8 |
| 1962 | 18,677 | 786 | 11.8 | 4.7 |
| 1963 | 19,168 | 844 | 12.0 | 5.1 |
| 1964 | 19,545 | 880 | 11.6 | 4.7 |
| 1965 | 20,432 | 958 | 12.0 | 5.1 |
| 1966 | 20,100 | 956 | 11.7 | 5.1 |
| 1967 | 20,116 | 982 | 11.6 | 5.2 |
| 1968 | 20,212 | 954 | 11.6 | 4.8 |
| 1969 | 21,038 | 1,090 | 12.0 | 5.5 |
| 1970 | 22,059 | 1,167 | 12.5 | 5.6 |
| 1971 | 22,577 | 1,220 | 12.6 | 6.0 |
| 1972 | 23,264 | 1,412 | 12.9 | 6.8 |
| 1973 | 23,412 | 1,383 | 12.9 | 6.5 |
| 1974 | 23,923 | 1,442 | 13.1 | 6.6 |
| 1975 | 25,173 | 1,512 | 13.7 | 7.0 |
| 1976 | 24,854 | 1,614 | 13.5 | 7.1 |
| 1977 | 26,579 | 1,673 | 14.3 | 7.5 |
| 1978 | 25,250 | 1,677 | 13.5 | 7.12 |
| 1979 | 24,945 | 1,812 | 13.0 | 7.5(7.0)* |
| 1980 | 24,829 | 1,607 | 12.9 | 6.6(6.0) |
| 1981 | 25,452 | 1,658 | 12.9 | 7.1(6.1) |
| 1982 | 26,141 | 1,639 | 12.6 | 6.7(5.9) |
| 1983 | 26,157 | 1,623 | 12.4 | 6.6(5.8) |
| 1984 | 27,002 | 1,760 | 13.6 | 6.7(6.2) |
| 1985 | 27,087 | 1,795 | 13.4 | 6.6(6.2) |
| 1986 | 28,437 | 1,892 | 13.9 | 6.7(6.5) |

Source: Suicide victims—U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States* (annuals). Suicide rates 1950-60, Grove, R.D. & Hetzel, A.M., *Vital Statistics in the United States 1940-1960*, Table 63, p. 374. Nonwhite Suicide rates, 1961-84 calculated from Hjolinger, Paul C. *Violent Deaths in the United States*. New York: the Guilford Press, p. 107-108. Nonwhite suicide rates, 1985-86, and black suicide rates, 1979-86 from *Vital Statistics of the United States* (annuals), Tables 1-9, p. 36

*See Footnote 1.

Suicide by Race and Gender

As shown in Table 9, there are wide disparities in both the frequency and rate of suicide by race and gender in the United States. Among whites and blacks, female suicide rates are markedly lower than those of their male counterparts. For example, between 1950-86, suicide rates among white males have consistently ranged from two to three times greater than the corresponding rates among white females. Generally, the disparity is even greater between black males and females. Table 9 illustrates that since 1978 the suicide rate for black males has been more than four times greater than that for black females. White males consistently have, by far, the highest suicide rates. Generally, white males have rates approximately twice those of black males. Suicide rates are higher for white females than for black females. White females have rates consistently twice as great as those for black females.

These findings are not surprising because it is a well-documented fact concerning suicide in America that men commit it more often than women. Studies have also shown that the male and female disparity in suicide holds among other groups disaggregated from the general nonwhite population (Hoppe & Martin, 1986; Smith et al., 1986; McIntosh & Santos, 1986; Smith et al., 1985).²

Why is it that, among blacks, females commit suicide much less often than males? We know that the male and female suicide differential persists even when controlling for age. Several sociocultural³ and non-sociocultural factors may help explain this differential phenomenon. Broadly speaking, these may be grouped under two headings: (1) the "more drastic and effective methods of suicide" (McIntosh & Santos, 1986) explanation; and (2) the differential familial and institutional treatment explanation.

The higher suicide rate among black men throughout life may be partially explained by the fact that black men tend to use more drastic and effective means to commit suicide than do black females. McIntosh and Santos (1986) in their analysis of methods of suicide from 1960 to 1978, find that among black males of all age groups, the use of firearms is high. They conclude that,

²For instance, Hoppe and Martin (1986) documented this finding among Mexican Americans in Bexar County, located in south-central Texas where Mexican Americans compose 47 percent of the approximate population of 988,800. Smith and his research associates (1985 and 1986) report this finding among Hispanics living in five Southwestern states (Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas) where 60 percent of the Hispanics in the United States live. Ninety percent of all Hispanics in those five states are of Mexican origin. McIntosh and Santos (1986) document this result among nonwhites, excluding blacks.

³Sociocultural refers to "possessing a social or cultural character or both." Hugo F. Reading, 1977. *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 195. For a more detail discussion of the concept, see David E. Hunter and Phillip Whitten, *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 3612. Also, Charlotte Seymour-Smith, 1986. *A Dictionary of Anthropology*. New York: MacMillan, p. 263.

Table 9. Suicide Victims and Rates by Race and Sex: 1950-86

| Year | Suicide Victims | | | | Suicide Rates | | | |
|------|-----------------|--------|-------|--------|---------------|--------|-------|--------|
| | White | | Black | | White | | Black | |
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| 1950 | 12,755 | 3,713 | 457 | 120 | 19.0 | 5.5 | 7.0 | 1.7 |
| 1951 | 11,784 | 3,468 | 439 | 119 | 17.3 | 5.0 | 6.6 | 1.7 |
| 1952 | 11,624 | 3,339 | 411 | 96 | 16.9 | 4.7 | 6.1 | 1.3 |
| 1953 | 12,008 | 3,299 | 419 | 96 | 17.2 | 4.6 | 6.4 | 1.3 |
| 1954 | 12,396 | 3,256 | 484 | 118 | 17.5 | 4.5 | 6.8 | 1.5 |
| 1955 | 12,430 | 3,662 | 442 | 115 | 17.2 | 4.9 | 6.1 | 1.5 |
| 1956 | 12,427 | 3,607 | 441 | 127 | 16.9 | 4.8 | 6.1 | 1.6 |
| 1957 | 12,331 | 3,547 | 506 | 113 | 16.5 | 4.6 | 6.8 | 1.4 |
| 1958 | 13,707 | 3,977 | 543 | 143 | 18.0 | 5.1 | 7.1 | 1.8 |
| 1959 | 13,724 | 3,995 | 605 | 174 | 17.7 | 5.0 | 7.5 | 1.9 |
| 1960 | 13,285 | 4,296 | 584 | 157 | 17.6 | 5.3 | 7.2 | 2.0 |
| 1961 | 13,677 | 4,335 | 622 | 159 | 17.1 | 5.3 | 7.6 | 1.9 |
| 1962 | 13,933 | 4,744 | 592 | 194 | 17.8 | 5.9 | 7.2 | 2.2 |
| 1963 | 14,051 | 5,117 | 653 | 191 | 17.8 | 6.3 | 7.9 | 2.2 |
| 1964 | 14,300 | 5,245 | 659 | 211 | 17.2 | 6.1 | 7.2 | 2.2 |
| 1965 | 14,624 | 5,718 | 732 | 226 | 17.4 | 6.6 | 7.7 | 2.5 |
| 1966 | 14,257 | 5,573 | 731 | 225 | 17.2 | 6.3 | 7.8 | 2.4 |
| 1967 | 14,307 | 5,809 | 712 | 270 | 16.8 | 6.5 | 7.6 | 2.7 |
| 1968 | 14,520 | 5,692 | 722 | 232 | 16.9 | 6.3 | 7.3 | 2.4 |
| 1969 | 14,886 | 6,152 | 804 | 286 | 17.2 | 6.8 | 8.1 | 2.8 |
| 1970 | 15,591 | 6,468 | 863 | 304 | 18.0 | 7.1 | 8.5 | 2.9 |
| 1971 | 15,802 | 6,775 | 861 | 359 | 17.9 | 7.3 | 8.6 | 3.4 |
| 1972 | 16,476 | 6,788 | 1,058 | 354 | 18.5 | 7.3 | 10.3 | 3.3 |
| 1973 | 16,823 | 6,589 | 1,075 | 308 | 18.8 | 7.0 | 10.0 | 3.0 |
| 1974 | 17,263 | 6,660 | 1,120 | 322 | 19.2 | 7.1 | 10.2 | 3.0 |
| 1975 | 18,206 | 6,967 | 1,165 | 347 | 20.1 | 7.4 | 10.6 | 3.3 |
| 1976 | 17,996 | 6,858 | 1,234 | 380 | 19.8 | 7.2 | 11.0 | 3.2 |
| 1977 | 19,531 | 7,048 | 1,275 | 398 | 21.4 | 7.3 | 11.4 | 3.5 |
| 1978 | 18,619 | 6,631 | 1,309 | 368 | 20.2 | 6.9 | 11.1 | 3.1 |
| 1979 | 18,504 | 6,441 | 1,428 | 384 | 20.0 | 6.6 | 11.6 | 2.8 |
| 1980 | 18,901 | 5,928 | 1,297 | 310 | 19.9 | 5.9 | 10.3 | 2.2 |
| 1981 | 19,166 | 6,286 | 1,315 | 343 | 20.0 | 6.2 | 10.2 | 2.4 |
| 1982 | 19,965 | 6,175 | 1,217 | 312 | 10.7 | 6.1 | 10.1 | 2.1 |
| 1983 | 20,097 | 6,060 | 1,321 | 302 | 20.6 | 5.9 | 9.9 | 2.0 |
| 1984 | 20,882 | 6,120 | 1,432 | 328 | 21.3 | 5.9 | 10.6 | 2.2 |
| 1985 | 21,256 | 5,831 | 1,482 | 314 | 21.5 | 5.6 | 10.8 | 2.1 |
| 1986 | 22,270 | 6,167 | 1,537 | 355 | 22.3 | 5.9 | 11.1 | 2.3 |

Source: Suicide victims—U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics of the United States (annuals). Suicide rates, 1950-60, Grove, R.D. and HETzel, A.M., Vital Statistics in the United States 1940-1960. Table 63, p. 374. Suicide rates, 1961-86 Vital Statistics of the United States (annuals), Tables 1-9, p. 36 for each year.

Note: The rates in parentheses for 1979-86 include blacks only

when black males of all ages, commit suicide, they nearly always use a "lethal" method (firearms or hanging). On the other hand, young black females employ "less lethal" methods (poisons) about as often as they use "lethal" methods. Other studies also support the preceding findings showing that handguns are used in over 50 percent of black male suicides and about 30 percent of black female suicides (C.D.C., 1985; Hendin, 1982:143).

Gibbs (1988) suggests several factors that might help account for the higher rates of suicide among black males relative to black females: (1) high-risk social indicators; (2) different child-rearing strategies of black parents toward male and female children; and (3) different treatment of black males and females by other key social institutions.

First, with regard to high-risk social indicators, Gibbs (1988) points out that young black males engage in and are exposed to more self-destructive and violent behavior than black females, which increases their risk for negative physical, psychological, and social outcomes. For instance, males are much more likely than females to be arrested for delinquency or criminal activity, to be incarcerated, to die as a result of homicide, and to be substance abusers. Parham and McDavis (1987) report that 42 percent of all homicide victims are black and that the majority of the perpetrators of these crimes are predominantly young black males less than 24 years old.

Second, Gibbs notes some literature has shown that black males and females generally receive different treatment from parents and family members which results in lower levels of support and positive reinforcement for black males in childhood and adolescence. For example, black males have been found to be more harshly disciplined, be trained for earlier independence, and to receive positive reinforcement for adolescent aggression and sexuality. Conversely, black females receive more nurturing, are trained for later independence, and are given less reinforcement for adolescent aggression. Black females are also given more reinforcement for academic achievement than males. Lester (1988) noted that generally females were more likely to have experienced love-oriented punishment than were males. Males were more likely to receive physical punishment.

Third, black males receive a greater degree of negative reinforcement from institutions outside the family, such as schools, the juvenile system, and the employment sector. For instance, black male students are more likely to be suspended, be expelled, and to drop out or, as Parham and McDavis (1987) put it, to be "pushouts," than are black females. Black male students are also disproportionately tracked into slower educational classes than are black female students, and they lack adequate role models throughout their education (Parham & Davis, 1987). Black males have a higher incidence of confrontations with the police and receive harsher treatment from the juvenile system. Young black males are less likely to find part-time or full-time employment than are young black females.

**Table 10. Suicide Rates by Race, Age Category, and Sex
Selected Years 1950-1986**

| Year | Male | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | White | Black | White | Black | White | Black | White | Black | White | Black | | | | | | |
| 1950 | 6.6 | 5.3 | 13.8 | 10.1 | 22.4 | 11.3 | 34.1 | 11.7 | 45.9 | 16.8 | 53.2 | 15.0 | 61.9 | 7.9 | 61.9 | 16.1 |
| 1960 | 8.6 | 5.3 | 14.9 | 12.9 | 21.9 | 13.5 | 33.7 | 12.8 | 40.2 | 16.9 | 42.0 | 12.6 | 55.7 | 11.3 | 61.3 | 15.9 |
| 1970 | 13.9 | 11.3 | 19.9 | 19.8 | 23.3 | 12.6 | 29.5 | 14.1 | 35.0 | 10.5 | 38.7 | 10.2 | 45.5 | 11.9 | 45.8 | 12.6 |
| 1980 | 21.4 | 12.3 | 25.6 | 21.8 | 23.5 | 15.6 | 24.2 | 12.0 | 25.8 | 11.7 | 32.5 | 11.1 | 45.5 | 11.3 | 52.8 | 28.0 |
| 1986 | 23.6 | 11.5 | 26.4 | 21.3 | 23.9 | 17.5 | 26.3 | 12.8 | 28.7 | 9.9 | 37.6 | 16.1 | 58.9 | 16.4 | 66.3 | 20.0 |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 16.0 | | 17.9 |

| Year | Female | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| | White | Black | White | Black | White | Black | White | Black | White | Black | | | | | | |
| 1950 | 2.7 | 1.7 | 5.2 | 2.8 | 8.2 | 2.2 | 10.5 | 4.0 | 10.7 | 1.2 | 10.6 | 2.5 | 8.45 | 2.9 | 8.9 | - |
| 1960 | 2.3 | 1.5 | 5.8 | 3.5 | 8.1 | 3.7 | 10.9 | 3.2 | 10.9 | 3.4 | 8.8 | 3.8 | 9.2 | 4.2 | 6.1 | 5.0 |
| 1970 | 4.2 | 4.1 | 9.0 | 5.8 | 13.0 | 4.3 | 13.5 | 4.5 | 12.3 | 2.2 | 9.6 | 3.5 | 7.2 | 3.2 | 5.8 | 6.4 |
| 1980 | 4.6 | 2.3 | 7.5 | 4.1 | 9.1 | 4.6 | 10.2 | 2.8 | 9.1 | 2.3 | 7.0 | 1.7 | 5.7 | 1.4 | 5.8 | - |
| 1986 | 4.7 | 2.3 | 6.2 | 3.8 | 8.3 | 2.8 | 9.6 | 3.2 | 9.0 | 4.2 | 7.7 | 2.8 | 8.0 | 2.6 | 5.0 | - |

Source: Rates for 1950. Grove, R.D. & Hetzel, A.M. Vital Statistics Rates in the United States 1940-60. Table 63, p. 374. Rates for 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1986. U.S. National Center of Health Statistics. Vital Statistics of the United States (annuals) Tables 1-m, p. 1-26; 1-9, p. 36, 1-9, p. 36, respectively.

^aNonwhites are shown for 11 years; the second rates for 1980 and 1986 include blacks only.

In short, Gibbs (1988:85) posits that this pervasive and persistent different treatment for black males results in less nurturance, fewer social supports, less positive reinforcement, more social and economic discrimination, and fewer opportunities for social mobility for black males as compared to black females in our society. Moreover, she points out, since "these factors have been theoretically and empirically linked in the literature to youth suicide it follows that black males are at much higher risk than black females for suicidal behavior" (Gibbs, 1988, 85). If indeed black males are characterized by higher levels of stress and are at a higher risk than black females and whites for suicidal behavior, one may plausibly expect black males to also have suicide rates higher than those of whites and black females. However, several major institutions (e.g., the strong family, the church, and extended kin within the traditional black community) have served as a force against high suicide rates (McDavis, 1979; Seiden, 1981; Gibbs, 1988).

Since 1966, when the black population became, by and large, urban and national as opposed to rural and southern, these institutions have lost some of their force in the black community (Gibbs, 1988). The continued weakening of these institutions could translate into increased suicide among blacks in general and black males in particular. Perhaps the negative impact of the weakening of these institutions with respect to suicide among young black men is already evident. Parham and McDavis (1987) point out that the sharp and steady increase in the suicide rate for young black men since the 1970s provides support for the hypothesis that their lives are characterized by higher levels of stress.

Suicide by Race, Gender, and Age

Table 10 presents male and female suicide rates by race and age for selected years between 1950 and 1986. The table reveals several clear patterns. In every age category, the suicide rate for white males is greater than white females and blacks. When white males are compared to black males and females (1980 and 1986) the pattern persists. Similarly, among females, with the lone exception of those age 85 or over in 1970, white women have higher suicide rates than their black counterparts.

The single largest increase in suicide rates over time (1950-86) for all race groups occurs among young men and women in the 15-to-24 age category. Among white males in this age group, the suicide rate increased approximately 257 percent; among black males it has increased about 117 percent. In fact, during recent years (1980-86) suicides by young men and women in the 15-24 age group have accounted for about 18 percent of all suicides. The overall percentage increase in suicide rates for white and black males between 1950 and 1986 was greater than 3 times the percentage increase for their female counterparts.

The data in Table 10 show in general, that there has been a dramatic increase in suicide rates since 1960 for persons between the ages 15 and 24. Clearly, young

males on the whole experienced the greatest increases. More specifically, white males had the largest increase, 174 percent, followed by black males, who had an increase of about 140 percent. In 1986, the rate among black males in this age category is slightly less than that of white males in general.

While the suicide rate among young white women ages 15 to 24 category increased by about 104 percent since 1960, the rate for black women increased by only 80 percent. By 1986, young black women, as is the case for males, appear to have a suicide rate which is about half that of their white counterparts.

As noted, there has been a dramatic increase over time in the suicide rates of those in the 15-24 age group among both whites and blacks. Yet, among black males, the highest suicide rates generally occur in the 25-34 age group. An examination of the increase in suicide rates among black males aged 15-24 years and their relatively higher suicide rates in the 25-34 age group, suggests that black males in the 15-34 age group compose the most pronounced high-risk suicide group for blacks. In short, black suicide peaks during adolescence and early adulthood, largely due to the high peak in black male suicide during these years of life. Why is it that suicide among young black males 15-34 is so pronounced? Several related factors may be useful in explaining this situation.

One possible explanation for this occurrence is that life conditions for minority men in general, and black men in particular, in the inner-city lead to feelings conducive to suicide. Indeed, black Americans are more urbanized and disproportionately overrepresented in the inner-cities of America's larger metropolitan areas than whites.⁴ In fact, in 1980, about one-fourth of the total black population in America resided in the 10 cities with the largest black population (Matney and Johnson, 1983). Life in inner-city black ghettos is conducive to feelings of depression and despair, and is laced with a culture of violence. In the inner-city black ghettos, the incidence of homicide and other violent crime, drugs, and gang violence is greater than in the suburbs, where a greater proportion of whites live. It has been noted (Sundby, 1972: 206), for instance, that "drug addiction risk-taking behavior [sic] plays a role in suicidal acts". Baechler (1979:79) asserts that, even more than alcohol, drugs can precipitate suicide by the introduction of conditions that lead an individual into a state of depression. Her assertion is based on the fact that the addicted persons constant risk of imprisonment adds a serious supplementary reason to seek

⁴For instance in 1970, 81 percent of the black population lived in urban areas; 72 percent of white lived in urban areas. (See p. 7 of Social and Economic...and Historical View (1970-1978.)) More than half (55-56 percent) of the black population and 49 percent of the Spanish origin population of the United States as of 1982 lived in central cities of metropolitan areas. The corresponding percentage for the white population is 23 percent. (See: Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics Series P-20, No. 363 Population Profile of the United States: 1980, p. 2; and Current Population Reports Special Studies Series P-23, No. 130, Population Profile of the United States: 1982, p. 10.) Almost 20 percent of the black population in 1980 lived in the top five cities with the largest black population: New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. (See America's Black Population: 1972 to 1981, A statistical View. Special Publication PIO/POP-83-1, 1983, p. 2, Table 1).

flight in death. More generally, Hendin (1982:94) has pointed out, "among young adult blacks there is a direct relations ... between suicide and violence." That relationship, he argues, rests on the black experience in American culture that spawns violence within blacks and also prevents blacks from controlling that violence.

The central cities of metropolitan areas have unemployment rates that are much higher for teenage blacks than for whites. In short, as Hendin asserts (1982:88) "with black suicide, one is dealing with a problem of the ghetto, that is, with the poorest socioeconomic group among the black population." By the time young black males have vicariously or directly experienced the deplorable and stressful life conditions of the ghetto for 24 years, it should not come as a surprise that their expectations of a meaningful life might have been destroyed. In turn, "it is not surprising that suicide becomes a problem for blacks at a relatively early age. A sense of despair, a feeling that life will never be satisfying, confronts many blacks at a far younger age than it does most whites" (Hendin, 1982:93). Perhaps, as Hendin posits (1982:93) "those blacks in the ghetto who survive past the more dangerous years (20 and 35) have made some accommodation with life...that has usually had to include a scaling down of their aspirations." However, for many of those who have not made such a compromise, pessimism, depression, and hopelessness may set in.

Beck (1967) found hopelessness not only to be an essential characteristic of depression, but also to serve as a link between depression and suicide. He observed clinically that when depressed patients believe there is no solution to life's problems, they view suicide as an escape from an intolerable life situation. In a subsequent study, Beck and his research associates (1985) again found that hopelessness was significantly related to eventual suicide. They also found that pessimism predicted eventual suicide.

In short, the dashing of self-actualization caused by racism, discrimination, low socioeconomic status, and the concomitant degrading life conditions of the ghetto may strip black men of their pride, self-esteem, and sense of human dignity and, in turn, induce pent up frustration and aggression that translates into self-directed violent behavior (Gibbs, 1988:19).

Fanon (1963) explains violent intragroup behavior as sublimated violence. He points out that for oppressed people, who cannot vent their anger the result is black-on-black homicide (Poussaint, 1975). On the other hand, "if this violence is directed toward the self, a suicide attempt results" (Baker, 1988:161). Spaight and Simpson (1986) also suggest that those who cannot find a suitable outlet for their anger may turn it inward. In fact, Spaight and Simpson (1986) and Getz et al. (1983) posit, that anger is the root of most suicide.

Any explanation of the differential suicide rates of black males and females, should incorporate the important role of cultural institutions in the

black community. In the black family, the male is expected to be tough (Spaights and Simpson, 1986), and this role expectation is passed down to young boys at an early age. A key role of the father and husband is that he rise above adversity to be the primary and adequate provider for the family. Several scholars have noted that the effectiveness of the black father is viewed as a function of his ability to aid in supporting his family, thereby, legitimizing his authority and serving as a role model of responsible behavior (Price-Bonham & Skeen, 1979).⁵ Cazenave (1979:585) found in his study of black male perceptions of what is expected of them as fathers that the data clearly indicated the salience of the provider role. For instance, the model category of responses for such questions as "what is the most important thing you do for your children?" and "what does the idea of a Good Father mean to you?" was "Provide" and a "Good Provider" respectively. To the extent that unmarried adolescent black males are beset with personal and institutional racism which not only relegates them to a life of poverty, but also precludes them from upward mobility, they may lose hope of ever being able to fulfill the provider role (Kirk & Zurker, 1979). The result may be self-criticism, self-debasement, and pessimism (Spaights & Simpson, 1986). Pessimism and self-criticism seem to have been widely accepted as two of the core signs and symptoms of depression (Beck, 1967: 10 & 204). And, "suicidal wishes have historically been associated with a depressed state" (Beck, 1967:30). Moreover, previous research has found that suicidal wishes had a higher correlation with pessimism (hopelessness) than any other symptom of depression (Beck, 1967:58). Some researchers, factor analyzing the Depression Inventory, have identified a factor containing only the variables pessimism (hopelessness) and suicidal wishes (Beck, 1967: 204).

Perhaps, the unfulfilled provider role expectation of black men leads to depression or hopelessness among black males. Unfulfilled family role expectations inculcated in black females at an early age, arguably create relatively less stress for black females than does the provider role expectation for the male. If this is true, one reason may be that black women view fulfillment of their role expectations as dependent, to some extent, upon their male counterpart's fulfillment of his provider role.

Given the link between depression and suicide, if failure to effectively fulfill the provider family role expectations for young black men leads to a greater incidence of depression or hopelessness among males than among young black women, one would expect that this failure phenomenon in turn, helps to explain greater rates of suicide among young black men than women.

Depressed patients tend to think in terms of a future in which present conditions (e.g., financial) will continue or get worse. It seems to be this sense of permanence and irreversibility of his status or his problem (hopelessness) which

⁵For citations of other studies, see Price-Bonham and Skeen, 1979, at p. 54.

forms the foundation for his consideration of suicide (Beck, 1967:23). The research literature has long pointed out that the most common subjective complaints presented by depressed patients is a feeling of hopelessness (Beck, 1967:12), and that the relationship of hopelessness to suicide is evidenced by the finding that of various symptoms correlated with suicide, the coefficient of hopelessness to suicide was highest (Beck, 1967:23; Minkoff, et al., 1973). Similarly, research evidence suggests that hopelessness is a danger sign of not only actual suicide but also the seriousness of suicidal intent (Minkoff, et al., 1973).

Married black males in the age group who find themselves unable to provide a decent life for their family may despair, adopt a sense of low self-esteem and failure, and become depressed. Perhaps, black men view the inability of being able to economically provide the "worst aspect of having and raising children" (Cazenave, 1979:585). This inability may lead to depression which has been linked to suicide. Moreover, this depression may lead to drug abuse, which has been found to be a suicide high-risk behavior.⁶

It should be noted that the relationship between male and female role expectations may not apply to black males or females in later-middle and later life in contemporary America. Generally, the curvilinear association between suicide and age in the United States is clear: the older one becomes, the higher the rate of suicide until very late in the life cycle. However, this general association differs within various demographic segments of the population. As shown in Table 10, suicide rates for white males generally increase with age. Hence, among white men, suicide rates are highest among those 75 or older and, more specifically, the rates are highest among those over age 84. However, this pattern does not persist among white women. Among white women, rates tend to peak between ages 45-64; there is no appreciable upturn in later life. In fact, in the latter years of life (over 74) there generally is a downturn in suicide rates among white females. Suicide rates for nonwhites in general, and blacks in particular, display a slightly different pattern from that of their white counterparts. Since 1960, black male suicide rates have tended to peak between ages 25-34. Subsequently, the rates decline somewhat and level off until very late (after age 84) in life. At that time (1980 and 1986) there is a marked increase. The suicide rate picture for black women is not as clear cut as is that of black males. Among the age groups listed, there is no pattern approaching consistency at which suicide reaches a peak.

Durkheim (1951) has offered a sociological theory to explain the much greater rate of suicide found among older persons. Durkheim's (1951:209) theory of status integration maintains that there exists an inverse relationship between social status integration and suicide rates: "...suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part." Durkheim's sociological theory was developed to explain variations in the

suicide rates of populations (e.g., age, occupation, education, sex, race, religion, marital status, etc.). Essentially, Durkheim suggests that suicide among the elderly will be higher than among the young because elderly persons experience greater social disintegration than do their younger counterparts. The relevance of this theory for explaining the greater suicide rate among elderly whites than among the black elderly population, however, rests on the ground that factors in the black culture and experience may cause older blacks to have a different life reality—greater social integration—than do their white counterparts. For instance, “as several social scientists have noted, the extended family has been one of the most, if not the most significant resources among black families” (Hill, 1977). Even though white families may be just as likely as black families to take in elderly members in their households (Hill, 1972) “it is a known fact that black communities have great respect for old people” (King, 1976). This respect for older blacks, including parents, grandparents and all old people in the black community, is one cultural factor that appears to differentiate large sections of Black America from many sections of white America” (King, 1976; 161). King (1976) points out that the extended Black family unit “gives security to all—young and old.”

If it is true that: (1) the degree of meaningful involvement in relationships with other persons in the family is greater for older blacks than for older whites; and, as Durkheim postulated, (2) the suicide rate in various populations varies inversely with the degree of social integration, then a lower rate of suicides among blacks than whites should not be surprising. Indeed, we would expect, *ceteris paribus*, that the greater social integration of the older black population in the family social group, would translate into lower suicide rates among older blacks than among older whites.

Seiden (1981) also suggests, that the higher suicide rate among white elderly persons than among blacks may be explained by differences in the “role and status of the elderly.” According to this explanation, differences between nonwhite and white communities with regard to both the social process of aging and the roles, statuses, and perquisites of age help account for higher suicide rates among white elderly. One point of difference, Seiden (1981) notes, seems to be the nature of the family unit. Seiden (1981) has pointed out that “the nonwhite family structure is more likely to be extended over several generations, in contrast to the nuclear family of white Americans.” Hill’s (1977) research led him to conclude similarly that “at a time when kinship bonds among whites are weakening, the extended family is still one of the most viable institutions for the survival ... of black people today.” And, in iden-

⁶Suicide high-risk behavior refers to behavior that is associated with an increased likelihood of suicide. More generally, a suicide risk factor is an attribute or exposure that is associated with increased likelihood of suicide. (See *Youth Suicide in the United States, 1970-1980*, p. 5.)

tifying the extended family as one of the five major strengths of the black family, Hill (1972) provided support for his position by noting the large-scale incorporation of elders and others into the black family structure. In short, it appears that black Americans have a stronger family bond than do whites (Hill, 1977).

Seiden (1981) posits that the extended black family structure translates into a greater degree of participation and purposeful activity for elderly blacks. The net result is that elderly black family members have an important role to play in a social (family) network.

Another hypothesis that may hold explanatory merit is the "traditional values" hypothesis (Seiden, 1981). Essentially this hypothesis posits that the racial differences in suicide rate results, to some extent, from the presence of traditional value of higher status accorded to old people in nonwhite communities than in white communities. The traditional value hypothesis advances the position that suicide will tend to be lower in those communities which hold a traditional value that the elderly are to be accorded a greater degree of status and respect. In addition to the enhanced role that the black community accords its elderly, the black community also holds a traditional value of greater respect for the black elderly. If it is true that elderly suicide is lower in a community that values its elderly, we should expect that the suicide rate among elderly blacks would be less than that among whites. Indeed, previous cross-cultural comparative studies have found in communities that have a traditional value of respect for elderly, the elderly suicide rate is low (Seiden, 1981). If, as Seiden (1981) suggests, older people are more likely to commit suicide because of loss of financial and employment status following retirement, then it may be that suicide occurs less likely among elderly blacks than whites because traditional values in the black communities curb the adverse effects of this loss of status phenomenon among minority elderly.

Suicide and Urbanism

Several studies, though not all, that examine the relationship between urbanism and suicide have shown that increased urbanism tends to lead to increased suicide (Henry & Short, 1954:76-77; Hendin, 1982:60; Blackwell, 1985:334; Kowalski et al., 1987). For instance, for the years 1970-78, suicide rates for all persons 15-24 years of age were higher in Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA) than for persons living in non-SMSAs (CDC; 1986). Prior research has argued, that experience of physical punishment precipitated habits of expressing aggression outwardly whereas experience of love-oriented punishment led people to develop habits of expressing aggression inwardly. Moreover, that research indicates that urban dwellers were more likely to have experienced love-oriented punishment than were rural dwellers (Lester, 1988:43). This research suggests that one may expect higher suicide in urban areas. If it is true, as some analysts have contended, that urbanism is not

only positively correlated with suicide but also independently affects suicide, one might expect to find higher percentages of suicide in urban areas than in nonurban areas among all race and gender groups.

Table 11 allows us to examine suicides among urban and nonurban residents during the 10-year period 1977-86. The data displayed in this table show an uninterrupted pattern of a greater percentage of suicide in urban areas than in nonurban areas. In the United States, blacks are more urban than whites. Moreover, a much larger proportion of the black population than whites resides in the central cities of metropolitan areas. If the dynamics of urban life in general and central cities in particular tend to lead to suicide, then urbanism may certainly help to explain the relatively higher black suicide rate. In his study of New York City, Hendin (1982) found that among blacks of both sexes between the ages of 20 and 35, suicide was a greater problem than among whites of the same age. For instance, black men in New York in this age group, suicide frequency and rate was twice as high as it was among white men in this age category (Hendin, 1982:87-88). This distribution pattern of black to white suicides among urban males, notes Hendin (1982:88), has been confirmed in subsequent studies of other metropolitan centers. Consider, for instance, that during 1980-86, compared with whites in the District of Columbia, black males had higher mortality rates for suicide than white males (MMWR, 1989b).

Table 11. Percentage of Suicides by Level of Urbanism: 1977-86

| | Urban | Nonurban | Metropolitan County | Nonmetropolitan County |
|------|-------|----------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1977 | .56 | .44 | .69 | .31 |
| 1978 | .55 | .45 | .68 | .32 |
| 1979 | .55 | .45 | .68 | .32 |
| 1980 | .55 | .45 | .76 | .24 |
| 1981 | .55 | .45 | .75 | .25 |
| 1982 | .56 | .43 | .75 | .24 |
| 1983 | .55 | .45 | .75 | .24 |
| 1984 | .55 | .45 | .74 | .25 |
| 1985 | .55 | .45 | .74 | .26 |
| 1986 | .55 | .45 | .74 | .26 |

Source: U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Statistics of the United States 1977-86. Tables 7-9 for 1977-78; Tables 8-9 for 1979-86.

Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

The preceding discussion has shown several important trends relating to black suicide. It has been shown that suicide is primarily a problem for young blacks under the age of 35. However, the relationship is curvilinear which indicates that in the upper age brackets, the suicide rate does increase. On balance, how-

ever, suicide is a bigger problem for the youth of our society. In addition, the study has shown that black suicide rates have consistently been lower than those of whites in society. Given the history of unequal treatment of blacks in the United States, one would expect a higher suicide rate among this population. The relationship between race and suicide concludes that blacks are at less risk for suicide than whites. However, the question remains, why has the black rate trailed that of whites regardless of gender or age?

Summary

The preceding discussion has described patterns of both suicide and homicide among blacks in the United States. These phenomena have been examined together because of the violence associated with each. In our examination of these two events, we find five common factors. First, both suicide and homicide, by and large, occur among the young. Specifically, the highest rates of suicide and homicide occur between the ages of 15-34. After age 34, the rates begin a gradual decline.

Second, men are more likely than women to commit suicide and to be homicide victims. Third, with regard to race, blacks have historically had higher homicide rates than whites, but lower rates of suicide than their white counterparts. During the 37 years covered by this study, the preceding trend held, but the magnitude of the differences has lessened in recent years. Also, the aforementioned trends hold for both genders within race.

Fourth, our examination identifies firearms as the number-one instrument used in both suicide and homicide. Both men and women generally employ firearms, the most lethal of the weapons, in committing the previously mentioned acts. However, when race is considered, both white and black males more frequently employ firearms than do their female counterparts. Fifth, for both blacks and whites, homicide and suicide victims are disproportionately represented among the lower socioeconomic strata of society.

Finally, in this paper we have pointed out that several theories have been advanced to explain the occurrence of suicide and homicide, e.g., sociological (Durkheim, Shaw, Clinard & Quinney), subcultural (Wolfgang & Ferracuti) economic (Parker & Smith), differential familial and institutional treatment (Gibbs), social disorganization (Sundby), and sociocultural (Hill & Gibbs). While none of these explanations constitutes an all encompassing explanation for suicide or homicide across all subgroups, each does appear to offer some explanatory power for specific groups. In short, future researchers are faced with the task of identifying a comprehensive theory capable of explaining both homicide and suicide differentials under various sociocultural and demographic circumstances.

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