

A JOURNAL OF  
RESEARCH ON  
AFRICAN AMERICAN  
MEN

# CHALLENGE

December 1994 • Volume 5, No. 2

## **Challenge: A Journal of Research on African American Men**

The journal of the Morehouse Research Institute

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Publication of *Challenge* is made possible by grants from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations and in-kind contributions from Morehouse College.

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

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Philip E. Secret  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*  
Obie Clayton  
*Morehouse College*

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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 non-white, 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 subcultural 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 <sup>a</sup>
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

<sup>a</sup>Homicide 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 experience 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'Carroll & 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 homicide 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



**Table 5: Homicide Rates by Race, Age, Category, and Sex  
Selected Years 1950-1986**

Year	<u>15-24</u>		<u>25-34</u>		<u>35-44</u>		<u>45-54</u>		<u>55-64</u>		<u>65-74</u>		<u>75-84</u>	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
	<b>Male</b>													
1950	3.7	56.6	5.4	105.6	6.4	60.4	5.5	52.8	4.4	32.3	4.1	20.9	3.5	11.9
1960	4.4	43.7	6.2	84.7	5.5	72.3	5.0	52.5	4.3	29.1	3.4	18.6	2.7	16.7
1970	7.9	92.0	13.0	137.3	11.0	110.8	9.0	90.3	7.7	55.1	5.6	37.0	5.1	17.1
1980	15.5	74.5	18.9	120.9	15.5	90.6	11.9	72.2	7.8	48.9	6.9	31.3	6.3	25.5
1986	12.5	79.2	14.6	108.0	23.9	79.4	8.6	56.3	28.7	35.4	4.3	30.0	4.6	27.9
	<b>Female</b>													
1950	1.3	15.8	1.9	25.8	1.1	17.7	1.6	8.7	1.3	3.2	1.1	3.9	1.2	3.9
1960	1.5	11.3	2.0	22.9	2.2	19.6	1.9	12.3	1.5	6.6	1.1	3.1	1.2	3.0
1970	2.7	16.3	3.4	23.3	3.2	22.6	2.2	16.1	2.0	7.8	1.7	7.1	2.5	5.1
1980	4.7	16.6	4.3	22.1	4.1	15.7	3.0	11.4	2.1	8.2	2.5	7.7	3.3	6.4
1986	4.3	16.2	4.4	21.9	3.5	14.8	2.8	8.5	1.9	6.8	2.2	8.7	3.1	8.6

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

In 1950, 1960, and 1970 includes blacks and other nonwhites; 1980 and 1986 includes blacks only.

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'Carroll 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'Carroll, Patrick W. and Mercy, James (1986). Homicide Rates by Geographic Region in Darnell 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 (1940-1960) 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).<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Protestants have higher rates than Catholics.

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

Year	Suicide Victims		Suicide Rates	
	White	Black	White	Black <sup>a</sup>
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).<sup>2</sup>

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 sociocultural<sup>3</sup> 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,

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<sup>2</sup>For 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.

<sup>3</sup>Sociocultural 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 Statics 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**

**Male**

Year	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	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
													10.5			18.9
													16.0			17.9

**Female**

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.

\*Nonwhites 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup>For 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).<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup>For 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 prerequisites 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-

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<sup>6</sup>Suicide 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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## Fifty Years After Myrdal: Blacks' Racial Policy Attitudes in the 1990s

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Steven A. Tuch

*The George Washington University*

Lee Sigelman

*The George Washington University*

Jack K. Martin

*University of Georgia*

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Half a century has passed since the publication of Gunnar Myrdal's monumental two-volume work, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944). Myrdal painted an agonizing portrait of the pervasiveness of racially prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory practices in American life, but perhaps his most important contribution lay not in the descriptive detail he amassed concerning these conditions (Bobo, 1993), but in the compelling new interpretive context he provided for understanding racial prejudice and discrimination. Central to this context was the paradox posed by the coexistence of race-based social, economic, and political inequality, on the one hand, and the cherished American cultural values of freedom and equality, on the other. By highlighting this deeply rooted contradiction, Myrdal did much

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The datasets utilized in this study were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. The data for the 1987-1993 General Social Surveys, National Data Program for the Social Sciences, were originally collected by James A. Davis and Tom W. Smith of the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, and distributed for the Roper Public Opinion Research Center, University of Connecticut. The data for the 1988-1992 American National Election Studies were originally collected by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, under the direction of Warren E. Miller. The original collectors of the data, the Consortium, and the Center bear no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

to inform and advance the efforts of civil rights activists, jurists, policy-makers, and others concerned with ameliorating racial disadvantage.

The decades since the publication of *An American Dilemma* have witnessed a dramatic decline in white Americans' overt expressions of anti-black and anti-integrationist sentiments (Greeley and Sheatsley, 1971; Hyman and Sheatsley, 1956, 1964; Jaynes and Williams, 1989; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985; Sheatsley, 1966; Taylor, Sheatsley, and Greeley, 1978). In recent years, though, this liberalizing trend appears to have moderated. According to some analysts, white racism persists today but finds expression, not in traditional beliefs about racial inferiority but rather in a new, more subtle language of racial antipathy that emphasizes blacks' ostensibly illegitimate demands for changing the status quo (Sears, 1988) or their failure to endorse "mainstream" social values (See and Wilson, 1988). Most whites now voice strong support for general principles of racial equality, but look askance at specific programs designed to reduce race-based disadvantage, such as admissions and hiring quotas. This is the so-called "principle-implementation gap," the causes and consequences of which have been subjects of heated debate (see, e.g., Kinder, 1986; Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986).

Though still incomplete, our understanding of the factors that shape whites' views on racial policy issues far outstrips our understanding of the factors that shape blacks' views on these issues. Indeed, data on blacks' policy views have traditionally been missing from the policy debate. In the words of A. Wade Smith (1987: 441), "The attitudes white Americans hold toward their black counterparts probably comprise the longest running topic in public opinion research. Yet ... until recently black Americans—long the minority group most identified with 'racial matters' in the United States—were virtually invisible to serious students of American values" (see also Sigelman and Welch, 1991; Walton, 1985). Because most researchers have employed data from national surveys with severely restricted black subsamples, it has proven difficult to examine attitudinal differentiation among blacks. Thus, as Smith (1987: 441) recognized, the false impression has arisen that black Americans all think alike about these issues—an impression that impedes our understanding of blacks' views on racial issues in general and on policy issues in particular.

### **Race-Targeted Policies and the Black Middle Class**

In this paper we explore the attitudes of black Americans—and middle class black Americans in particular—toward policies designed to ameliorate racial disadvantage. We address two key issues. First, how supportive are blacks of race-targeted policies? Race-targeted policies are initiatives, typically but not necessarily by the federal government, explicitly intended to combat racial discrimination and reduce racial inequality. Those who study attitudes toward race-targeted policies often distinguish between compensatory programs, such as job training and special education, which are designed to help members of disadvantaged

groups compete more effectively in the workplace, and preferential treatment, such as admissions and hiring quotas (e.g., Lipset and Schneider, 1978). Prior research has established that most whites and most blacks support the former (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Sigelman and Welch, 1991). On the other hand, most whites reject programs they view as according preferential treatment on the basis of group membership, because, in their view, such programs violate fundamental American principles of fairness. Many blacks seem to agree with them, but the evidence is far less reliable.

In exploring blacks' attitudes toward race-targeted policies that span the broad spectrum between the extremes of compensatory action and preferential treatment, we pay special attention to middle class blacks. In recent years, much has been said about what many see as the increasing social and economic polarization of the black community occasioned by the concurrent swelling of the black middle class and entrapment in poverty of the great mass of ghetto blacks (see especially Wilson, 1987). Is this socioeconomic differentiation fostering political cleavages among blacks? According to one school of thought, a conservative black middle class is emerging whose objective class interests are closely tied to those of middle class whites. These common class interests, it is argued, predispose middle class blacks to adopt perspectives and behaviors generally associated with whites similarly situated in the class structure rather than with lower and working class blacks. However, others argue that blacks, as members of a historically subordinated group, are likely to maintain their sense of group identification in spite of increasing economic fragmentation. According to this view, black political interests and perspectives continue to cross class lines. It follows that in contrast to middle class whites, who exhibit strong class ties, middle class blacks are likely to identify common interests with their racial rather than their class peers.

Several attempts have been made to gauge the extent to which blacks' views on policy issues reflect their class standing (Dawson, 1991; Gilham and Whitby, 1989; Jackman and Jackman, 1983; Seltzer and Smith, 1985; Smith and Seltzer, 1992; Tate, 1993; Walton, 1985; Welch and Combs, 1985; Welch and Foster, 1987). Unfortunately, only rarely have these studies focused on attitudes toward race-targeted policies, and no study has focused on attitudes toward a broad array of such policies. In what follows, we merge data from two series of omnibus national opinion surveys, the 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1993 General Social Surveys (GSS), and the 1988, 1990, and 1992 American National Studies (ANES), to enable analysis of blacks' appraisals of a substantially wider variety of questions about race-targeted policies than have been considered in any prior study.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The GSS was not conducted in 1992, and the ANES is conducted only in even-numbered years.

### Racial Differences in Support for Race-Targeted Policies

Table 1 shows how black and white interviewees in the 1987-93 GSS and the 1988-92 ANES responded to eight questions about race-targeted policies. On the first of these questions, which appeared in the GSS, interviewees were asked whether too much, about the right amount, or too little is being spent on assistance to blacks. Their responses indicate that a wide gulf separates blacks from whites on this issue: eight out of ten blacks but only one white in four said that too little is being spent on assistance to blacks, while one white in four but only one black in forty said that too much is being spent for this purpose. Black-white differences of comparable magnitude cropped up on the second question, which is the ANES version of the same item. Here, about seven blacks in ten but fewer than two whites in ten expressed support for increased federal spending on programs that assist blacks.

**Table 1. Blacks' and Whites' Opinions on Racial Policy Issues**

(1) We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on assistance to blacks?

	Blacks (N=475)	Whites (N=3754)
Too little	80.8%	25.6%
About right	16.8%	50.4%
Too much	2.3%	23.9%

(2) Should federal spending programs that assist blacks be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

	Blacks (N=691)	Whites (N=4321)
Increased	69.5%	18.4%
Kept the same	28.8%	56.5%
Decreased	1.7%	25.2%

(3) Some people think that blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to improve their living standard. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to blacks. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

	Blacks (N=432)	Whites (N=3470)
Government should help	36.6%	5.5%
	17.6%	9.4%
	31.9%	29.9%
	6.3%	20.1%
No special treatment	7.6%	35.1%

**Table 1**  
(continued)

(4) Some people feel that the government should make every effort to improve the social and economic positions of blacks. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

	Blacks (N=655)	Whites (N=4088)
Government should help	28.9%	4.0%
	11.0%	5.1%
	9.3%	11.4%
	23.7%	26.0%
	9.8%	16.5%
	7.6%	15.9%
Blacks help themselves	9.8%	21.2%

(5) Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

	Blacks (N=513)	Whites (N=3492)
Agree strongly	19.5%	39.3%
Agree somewhat	26.9%	35.1%
Neither	12.1%	9.6%
Disagree somewhat	17.9%	12.6%
Disagree strongly	23.6%	3.4%

(6) Some people feel that if black people are not getting fair treatment in jobs, the government in Washington ought to see to it that they do. Others feel that it is not the federal government's business. Have you had enough interest in this question to favor one side over the other?

	Blacks (N=316)	Whites (N=1780)
Should intervene	91.1%	50.9%
Should not intervene	8.9%	49.1%

(7) Some people say that because of past discrimination blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion—are you for or against preferential hiring for blacks?

	Blacks (N=476)	Whites (N=3379)
Strongly favor	53.4%	6.2%
Favor	10.1%	7.9%
Oppose	14.9%	18.3%
Strongly oppose	21.6%	67.6%



**Table 1**  
(continued)

(8) Some people say that because of past discrimination it is sometimes necessary for colleges and universities to reserve openings for black students. Others oppose quotas because they say quotas give blacks advantages they haven't earned. What is your opinion? Are you for or against quotas to admit black students?

	Blacks (N=481)	Whites (N=3296)
Strongly favor	64.4%	11.7%
Favor	12.3%	15.4%
Oppose	8.5%	22.4%
Strongly oppose	14.8%	50.6%

SOURCES: Items (1) and (3) are from the National Opinion Research Center's 1987-1993 General Social Surveys (Davis and Smith, 1993). Items (2) and (4) - (8) are from the Institute for Social Research's 1988, 1990, and 1992 American National Election Studies (Mittler, 1993). Both sets of surveys are based on full probability sampling designs and are representative of the noninstitutionalized adult population of the continental United States.

The third and fourth items, taken from the GSS and the ANES, respectively, asked about the necessity for special assistance for blacks. On the first version of this question, 54 percent of the black interviewees placed themselves on the "government should help" side of the scale and only 14 percent on the "no special treatment" side, but these percentages were almost exactly reversed among white interviewees. On the second version, black-white differences are somewhat less extreme, probably because this question invoked black self-help as a counterpoise to special efforts to help blacks; given that symbolically potent stimulus, more than 27 percent of black interviewees took a stand against special government efforts to help blacks.

The self-help motif also figured prominently in the fifth item, which solicited agreement or disagreement with the proposition that blacks, like earlier minority groups, should work their way up "without any special favors." More blacks agreed (46 percent) than disagreed (42 percent) with this notion, although agreement was much more widespread among whites (74 percent) and disagreement correspondingly lower (16 percent).

In contrast to the first five items, each of which asked in one way or another about a race-targeted policy without specifically describing the policy, the sixth, seventh, and eighth items were more specific. Of all eight items considered here, the sixth, which asked whether the federal government should intervene to ensure that blacks receive fair treatment in employment, seems closest to traditional American conceptions of equal opportunity and most distant from notions of preferential treatment. It thus occasions no great surprise to observe that white interviewees were more likely to express support for race-targeted policy in response to this question than to any of the seven others. Even so, only

51 percent of whites said that federal intervention was warranted, with 49 percent disagreeing. Their disagreement might, to some extent, have stemmed from specific objections to federal, as opposed to state or local, intervention (Kuklinski and Parent, 1981; Margolis and Haque, 1981), but whatever its sources, it contrasts sharply with the clear-cut consensus among blacks, 91 percent of whom considered federal intervention warranted to ensure that blacks are accorded fair treatment in employment.

The seventh and eighth items focused on two of the most controversial applications of race-targeting in public policy, racial preferences in hiring and promotion decisions and the use of racial quotas in college admissions. Both blacks and whites were somewhat more positively disposed toward admissions quotas than they were toward preferential hiring and promotion, but in both cases blacks were far more supportive than whites were: 63 percent of blacks but only 14 percent of whites endorsed preferential hiring and promotion, and 77 percent of blacks but only 27 percent of whites approved of the use of quotas in college admissions.

Across the eight items considered here, two broad patterns stand out. The first and most obvious is simply that blacks were much more likely than whites to support race-targeted policies. This is by no means a novel finding, but insofar as we are aware it has not previously been documented for such a wide variety of race-targeted policies. Second, blacks were by no means homogeneous in their support of race-targeted policies. To be sure, as many as nine blacks in ten expressed support for some of these policies, but on other questions the split between positive and negative responses was much more evenly balanced. The question now becomes whether, especially on policies about which there was fairly widespread disagreement among blacks, such disagreement was structured along class lines. That is, can we observe a clear class imprint on blacks' evaluations of race-targeted policies, with middle class blacks being less likely than other blacks to support such policies?

### **Class Differences in Blacks' Support for Race-Targeted Policies**

In Table 2 we reconsider the same eight survey items examined in Table 1, this time by distinguishing middle class from other blacks and whites.<sup>2</sup> On the first two items in the table, both of which pertained to support for government spending on programs for blacks, we see only faint hints of any class fissure among blacks in support for race-targeted policies—differences of only three or four

<sup>2</sup>Most prior work in this area has used education and/or income as proxy measures of class. Such measures require the selection of arbitrary education and income cutting points to differentiate classes. We measure class in terms of a less arbitrary occupation-based classification, defining members of the middle class as incumbents of the "managerial and professional specialty occupations" category of the 1980 Census occupational classification, plus nonclerical incumbents of the "technical, sales, and administrative support occupations" category (codes 003 through 259).

percentage points between middle class and other blacks, well within the bounds of sampling error. Nor do the responses of middle class blacks stand out on the third and fourth questions, which asked about the appropriateness of special help for blacks. On the third item, the balance of positive and negative responses was almost identical for middle class and other blacks, with a slightly higher percentage of the former than the latter expressing a noncommittal view. On the fourth item, the percentage of middle class and other blacks who were positively oriented toward race-targeted programs (categories 1-3) was again virtually identical, but middle class blacks were slightly less attracted than other blacks (by 22 percent to 28 percent) to the black self-help end of the continuum (categories 5-7).

**Table 2. Social Class Differences in Blacks' and Whites' Opinions on Racial Policy Issues**

(1) We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on assistance to blacks?

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class (N=114)	Others (N=361)	Middle Class (N=1447)	Others (N=2307)
Too little	78.9%	81.4%	27.2%	24.6%
About right	17.5%	16.6%	54.4%	47.9%
Too much	3.5%	1.9%	18.4%	27.4%

(2) Should federal spending programs that assist blacks be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class (N=122)	Others (N=569)	Middle Class (N=1661)	Others (N=2660)
Increased	67.2%	69.9%	18.8%	18.1%
Kept the same	29.5%	28.6%	57.2%	56.0%
Decreased	3.3%	1.4%	24.0%	25.9%

(3) Some people think that blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to improve their living standard. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to blacks. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class (N=99)	Others (N=333)	Middle Class (N=1321)	Others (N=2149)
Government should help	34.9%	37.3%	5.6%	5.5%
	15.8%	18.1%	10.5%	8.7%
	37.3%	30.4%	30.7%	29.4%
	5.7%	6.2%	24.5%	17.4%
No special treatment	6.3%	8.0%	28.8%	39.0%

Table 2

(continued)

(4) Some people feel that the government should make every effort to improve the social and economic positions of blacks. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class	Others	Middle Class	Others
	(N=122)	(N=533)	(N=1629)	(N=2459)
Government should help	22.1%	30.4%	3.2%	4.6%
	13.1%	10.5%	5.3%	5.0%
	13.9%	8.3%	14.1%	9.5%
	28.7%	22.5%	27.1%	25.2%
	10.7%	9.6%	17.7%	15.6%
	6.6%	7.9%	16.5%	15.5%
Blacks help themselves	4.9%	10.9%	16.0%	24.6%

(5) Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class	Others	Middle Class	Others
	(N=94)	(N=419)	(N=1389)	(N=2103)
Agree strongly	12.8%	21.0%	32.3%	43.8%
Agree somewhat	23.4%	27.7%	35.7%	34.7%
Neither	6.4%	13.4%	9.5%	9.7%
Disagree somewhat	17.0%	18.1%	17.0%	9.7%
Disagree strongly	40.4%	19.8%	5.5%	2.0%

(6) Some people feel that if black people are not getting fair treatment in jobs, the government in Washington ought to see to it that they do. Others feel that it is not the federal government's business. Have you had enough interest in this question to favor one side over the other?

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class	Others	Middle Class	Others
	(N=67)	(N=249)	(N=821)	(N=959)
Should intervene	91.0%	91.2%	53.8%	48.8%
Should not intervene	9.0%	8.8%	46.2%	51.6%

(7) Some people say that because of past discrimination blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion—are you for or against preferential hiring for blacks?

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class	Others	Middle Class	Others
	(N=88)	(N=388)	(N=1352)	(N=2027)
Strongly favor	42.0%	55.9%	5.3%	6.9%
Favor	9.1%	10.3%	8.5%	7.4%
Oppose	23.9%	12.9%	19.2%	17.8%
Strongly oppose	25.0%	20.9%	67.1%	67.9%

**Table 2**

(continued)

(8) Some people say that because of past discrimination it is sometimes necessary for colleges and universities to reserve openings for black students. Others oppose quotas because they say quotas give blacks advantages they haven't earned. What is your opinion—are you for or against quotas to admit black students?

	Blacks		Whites	
	Middle Class (N=87)	Others (N=394)	Middle Class (N=1331)	Others (N=1965)
Strongly favor	60.9%	65.2%	11.0%	12.1%
Favor	13.8%	11.9%	16.0%	14.9%
Oppose	11.5%	7.9%	22.9%	22.0%
Strongly Oppose	13.8%	15.0%	50.0%	51.0%

SOURCES: See Table 1.

Responses to the fourth item hinted at a warmer embrace of black self-help among working class and lower class blacks than can be found in the black middle class. This came through much more clearly in responses to the fifth item, on which 57 percent of middle class blacks but only 38% of other blacks registered their disagreement with the suggestion that blacks, like many other minorities before them, should work their way up without any special favors. This is the first clear class-based differential we have observed in blacks' responses, and, intriguingly, middle class blacks are less likely to endorse this notion than their lower and working class counterparts.

On the sixth item, which called for agreement or disagreement that the federal government should intervene in cases of unfair job treatment of blacks, identical percentages of middle class and other blacks endorsed government action. However, on the seventh item, a class-based differential emerged in support for racial preferences in hiring and promotion, and this time it was lower and working class blacks who took a more positive view of a race-targeted policy: 51 percent of the black middle class, but 66 percent of other blacks, endorsed such a policy. With the data at hand, it is difficult to know how to account for this difference. On the one hand, it could be that most middle class black respondents rose through their own individual efforts and were thus ill disposed toward letting other blacks take what they perceived to be the easy way out; however, the responses of members of the black middle class to questions about other race-targeted policies—and especially to the fifth question—do not seem very consistent with such a mindset. Although this matter warrants much closer scrutiny, it is worth speculating that middle class blacks have had greater first-hand experience than lower or working class blacks with preferential hiring and promotion programs and are thus more keenly attuned to some of the negative effects such programs can have on their intended beneficiaries (see, e.g., Coate and Loury, 1993; Summers, 1991).

Finally, the gap between middle class and other blacks in support for preferential hiring and promotion was not matched by any class-based differential in support for racial quotas in college admissions: 75% of middle class blacks and 77% of other blacks expressed support for such quotas. On six of the eight items considered here, then, we observed little or no difference in the views of middle class and other blacks toward race-targeted policies. On one of the two remaining items, middle class blacks were more supportive of a race-targeted policy; on the other item they were less so. These comparisons are hardly indicative of any consistent or appreciable class-based differential in blacks' attitudes.

### Conclusion

In each policy area examined here, blacks were more favorable than whites, often substantially so, toward federal government intervention to ameliorate racial inequality. From a self-interest point of view this is hardly surprising. More unexpected, perhaps, is our failure, in analyses of class differences among blacks on these policies, to uncover any consistent evidence of a deep political divide between middle class and other blacks. Indeed, we observed hardly any evidence of political divide, deep or shallow, between middle class blacks, on the one hand, and lower or working class blacks, on the other. Despite earlier indications that middle class blacks have adopted attitudes and behaviors similar in some respects to those of middle class whites (see, e.g., Smith and Seltzer, 1992), no such class-based attitudinal configuration joining middle class blacks and whites has surfaced here. Race, not class, is the primary determinant of the views of both whites and blacks on race-targeted policies. Class appears to play little, if any, role. This is not to say that blacks are united in their support for race-targeted policies, for, as we have seen, that is simply not the case. But black disunity on the issues does not, for the most part, pit the emerging black middle class against the persisting black lower and working classes. Why is this so? That is, why is there so little differentiation between the policy views of middle class and other blacks? One contributing factor is undoubtedly that the overrepresentation of middle class blacks in public sector occupations and the dependence of many lower class blacks on government assistance creates a natural coalition based on common economic interests that cross class lines (Welch and Combs, 1985)—a coalition that naturally tends to favor governmentally-based approaches to dealing with the problems that continue to beset blacks. More generally, though, blacks tend to retain a strong sense of solidarity with other blacks even after they have achieved middle class status and moved to the suburbs (Bledsoe, Welch, Sigelman, and Combs, 1994). Many members of the black middle class were not born into the black middle class, and their basic political orientations may be more reflective of the circumstances in which they were raised than of the circumstances in which they currently live. It is also true that middle class blacks continue to feel disadvantaged relative to middle class whites, particularly in the workplace. There

is ample evidence that many successful black managers and professionals perceive themselves as targets of continuing discrimination at work and elsewhere (see, e.g., Feagin, 1991), and such perceptions cannot help but reinforce racial identification rather than fostering class identification with whites. Moreover, like Jews and members of other historically subordinated groups, blacks are likely to maintain their strong sense of group identification in spite of increasing economic fragmentation. It follows that in contrast to middle class whites, who exhibit strong class ties, middle class blacks tend to identify common interests with their racial rather than their class peers.

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# **Economics of Life and Death: Mortality and Survival Rates for African-Americans**

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S.V. Char  
*Clark Atlanta University*

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## **Introduction**

The classical textbook definition of economics portrays the field as one that deals chiefly with how a society employs limited resources with alternative uses to produce goods and services for present and/or future consumption. However, in a recent issue of *Scientific American*, Amartya Sen exhorted professional economists to look at economic science not as a discipline solely concerned with income and wealth, but as one that deals with social issues and paradoxes such as islands of poverty in rich nations, famines amidst plenty, and higher mortality rates and lower survival rates for racial and ethnic minorities. Given this backdrop, this paper will deal with what Sen called "The Economics of Life and Death." Specifically, the paper examines the correlates of premature death, infant mortality rates, and the associated costs

## **Economics of the Marginalized**

Social scientists, particularly economists, cannot disregard the dualistic aspects of the American economy such as the conspicuously asymmetric income and wealth distribution. This distribution has resulted in affluence for many and deprivation for others. As we have previously mentioned, economics is a social science which deals mainly with how efficiently a society employs limited resources with alternative uses to produce goods and services for present or future consumption. What is missing from this definition is concern with the welfare

of all citizens, especially the marginalized sectors. Such concern should form the core of the discipline.

Economic models must, in a value free manner, address social phenomena such as homelessness, higher mortality, and persistent inequality in income and wealth distribution. The United States is a rich nation with many of its citizens enjoying one of the highest standards of living in the world. However, for many others, poverty is a reality and poor health and inadequate care is a constant reminder that wealth is not equally distributed. For example, the health status of the average African-American has been invariably inferior to that of others since colonial times. Differential mortality and survival rates between whites and blacks have long been subjected to academic scrutiny, but the research has led to no comprehensive policies to narrow the gap (Osei, 1992; Dayal, 1982; Devasa et al; 1980; Kitagawa, 1973; Manton, 1989; the Heckler Report, 1985). To make the preceding point more salient, an examination of the black-white infant mortality rates will show that the differential between the two groups increased between 1980 and 1990, from 1.95 to 2.21.

**Survival Rates.** Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, black life expectancy has been considerably lower than that of whites. This statistic is important for two reasons: (1) life expectancy at birth is a measure of mortality differentials and (2) it is suggestive of the adequacy of health delivery systems. The abridged life table presented in Table I shows that whites can expect to outlive blacks in each functional age group with the exception of the 85 and over grouping. Tables II and III show the probabilities of dying in specific functional age groups. These data further show that the death rates for black males are higher than for any other group. Specifically, if a white male at birth were subjected to a 1987 death rate, he could expect to live approximately 6 years

**Table 1**  
**Abridged Life Table for Blacks and Whites**  
**Number Surviving at Beginning of Specific Age Group**

Age Group	White Males	Black Males	White Females	Black Females
Under 1 year	99,154	98,101	99,355	98,454
1-4 years	99,957	99,918	99,963	99,920
5-14 years	99,974	99,956	99,983	99,972
15-24 years	99,857	99,723	99,952	99,923
25-34 years	88,828	99,586	99,937	99,853
35-44 years	99,731	99,293	99,885	99,702
45-54 years	99,459	99,897	99,704	99,413
55-64 years	98,533	97,677	99,197	98,672
65-74 years	98,754	91,714	98,085	97,750
75-84 years	92,311	91,641	95,158	94,238
85 years and over	82,380	85,675	86,447	88,144

Compiled and computed by the author from U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the U.S.* 1993.

**Table 2**  
**Life Table for African American Females and Males**  
**African American Females**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0164	100,000	1,640	73.6
1-5	.0027	98,360	261	73.9
5-10	.0013	98,099	125	70.1
10-15	.0011	97,973	109	65.1
15-20	.0025	97,864	240	60.2
20-25	.0042	97,624	408	55.4
25-30	.0057	97,216	552	50.6
30-35	.0090	96,664	865	45.9
35-40	.0120	97,799	1,148	41.2
40-45	.0167	94,650	2,579	36.7
45-50	.0241	93,071	2,246	32.4
50-55	.0383	98,825	3,481	28.0
55-60	.0542	87,344	4,730	24.0
60-65	.0853	82,614	7,051	20.3
65-70	.1206	75,563	9,114	16.9
70-75	.1642	66,450	10,914	13.9
75-80	.2229	55,536	12,381	11.1
80-85	.3486	43,156	15,043	8.6
85 +	1.0000	28,112	28,112	6.8

**African American Males**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0199	100,000	1,993	66.3
1-5	.0033	98,007	319	66.7
5-10	.0018	97,688	179	62.9
10-15	.0023	97,509	221	58.0
15-20	.0072	97,288	698	53.1
20-25	.0121	96,591	1,171	48.5
25-30	.0142	95,420	1,357	44.0
30-35	.0197	94,062	1,853	39.6
35-40	.0261	92,210	2,403	35.4
40-45	.0321	89,807	2,879	31.1
45-50	.0417	86,928	3,624	27.2
50-55	.0620	83,303	5,161	23.3
55-60	.0853	78,142	6,665	19.7
60-65	.1305	71,478	9,329	16.2
65-70	.1894	62,149	11,772	13.3
70-75	.2537	50,377	12,780	10.8
75-80	.3399	37,597	12,779	8.6
80-85	.4665	24,818	11,977	6.8
85 +	1.0000	28,112	28,112	6.8

Source: Antonio McDaniel (1990)

**Table 3**  
**Life Table for White American Females and Males**  
**White American Females**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0074	100,000	738	79.2
1-5	.0016	98,262	161	78.8
5-10	.0009	99,101	89	74.9
10-15	.0009	99,012	88	70.0
15-20	.0024	98,924	241	65.0
20-25	.0025	98,683	244	60.2
25-30	.0026	98,439	260	55.3
30-35	.0034	98,179	337	0.5
35-40	.0048	97,842	473	45.6
40-45	.0073	97,369	706	40.8
45-50	.0123	96,663	1,192	36.1
50-55	.0204	95,471	1,950	31.5
55-60	.0320	93,521	2,994	27.1
60-65	.0510	90,527	7,051	20.3
65-70	.0766	85,914	6,579	19.0
70-75	.1179	79,335	0,355	15.4
75-80	.1811	69,980	12,677	12.1
80-85	.2899	57,303	16,610	9.2
85 +	1.0000	40,693	40,693	6.9

**White American Males**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0093	100,000	935	72.3
1-5	.0021	99,065	206	72.0
5-10	.0014	98,860	135	68.3
10-15	.0016	98,724	162	63.2
15-20	.0058	98,563	572	58.3
20-25	.0078	97,991	766	53.6
25-30	.0078	95,225	757	49.1
30-35	.0089	96,468	862	44.4
35-40	.0109	95,606	1,039	39.8
40-45	.0142	94,568	1,347	35.2
45-50	.0220	93,220	2,055	30.7
50-55	.0363	91,166	3,311	26.3
55-60	.0583	87,855	5,121	22.2
60-65	.0918	82,734	7,599	18.4
65-70	.1328	75,135	9,977	15.0
70-75	.2029	65,158	13,222	11.9
75-80	.2932	51,936	15,227	9.3
80-85	.4192	36,709	15,387	7.1
85 +	1.0000	21,321	13,321	5.4

Source: Antonio McDaniel (1990)

longer than his black male counterpart (McDaniels, 1992). White women also can expect to outlive their black female counterparts by approximately 5.5 years. As previously mentioned, mortality differentials are linked to differentials in the force of mortality related to specific causes of death.

The main causes of death for all Americans, in descending order of significance, are presented in Table IV. Blacks suffer disproportionately high rates of death under almost every listed category. Given the disparities in life expectancy and the differential force of mortality due to specific causes of death, Table V shows the relative gains in life expectancy by race after eliminating specific causes. As McDaniels shows, eliminating a specific cause almost always adds more years to the black life expectancy than that of whites (McDaniels, 1992). Looking at these data in a different way, i.e., examining specific causes of death that could have been avoided if the force of mortality for both blacks and whites were the same, yields an interesting picture (See Table V).

The data presented in Table VI reflect excessive deaths, i.e. deaths which could be eliminated with better health care or lifestyle changes. From the economics of life and death perspective, we argue that these deaths not only lower the life expectancy of blacks as a group but have an "opportunity cost" in terms of the potential contribution these persons could have made to the Gross Domestic Product. Even if one is cynical or conservative, the contributions to GDP, could be weighed against the cost of health care delivery.

**Table IV.**  
**Causes of Death 1991**

Cause of Death	Crude Death Rate (per 100,000 population)	Percent of Total
Total	854.0	100.0
Cardiovascular Diseases	360.3	33.2
Malignancies, leukemia	202.9	23.8
Accidents	36.2	4.2
Pulmonary Diseases	35.2	4.1
Pneumonia, Influenza	29.6	3.5
Diabetes Mellitus	19.7	2.2
Suicide	11.9	
Liver Diseases, Cirrhosis	9.8	
Other Infectious Diseases	14.5	
Homicide, Legal Intervention	10.8	17.7
Nephrosis, Nephritis, etc.	8.7	
Septicemia	7.7	
Perinatal Problems	6.6	
Congenital Anomalies	4.7	
Neoplasms, Ulcers, Hernia, Anemia, Gall		
Bladder Disorder, Tuberculosis, Meningitis, etc.	27.4	3.1
All Other Causes	70.3	8.2

Source: Compiled by the author from National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the U.S. 1993*.

A crude estimate of the economic loss to the nation due to premature or preventable deaths would depend on, among other things, the hazard rate under each cause of death, the hypothetical life-time or annual earnings of an individual and the number of years of active service prior to premature death. Assuming a modest average loss of \$500,000 per person, the aggregate national loss due to the excess deaths annually would be about \$24 billion, not a modest amount by any standard.

**The Antidote to Excess Deaths.** Demographers and sociologists have offered many explanations for the vast disparity in death rates between blacks and whites (Thomas et al, 1993). The most widely accepted explanations for the extremely high mortality rates experienced by blacks include: lack of adequate and timely health care, lack of education and awareness, unwholesome living and working environments, undesirable life-styles and food habits, nutritional inadequacy in the case of infants and children, and high incidence of crime and violence.

Economic progress could be the best antidote for high mortality rates and this has been proven in numerous studies. Compounding the African American death rates are the extremely high infant mortality rates. The infant mortality rates are not randomly distributed among African Americans but are concentrated among the poor and those born to single mothers. Sen's (1981) explorations into differential infant mortality rates such as under legitimate and illegitimate births found that because, more often than not, illegitimate babies do not have access to an "exchange entitlement" or parents with sufficient incomes, they do not have the basic physiological requirements, thus the higher mortality rates.

Recent studies by Jaynes and Williams (1989) and others have confirmed the Sen hypothesis that high infant mortality rates are correlated highly with out of wedlock births. Specifically, the Winter and Cole study showed that a 50 percent escalation in the rate of infant mortality in Europe during the period from 1914-24 was essentially an illegitimate infant mortality crisis. The authors argued that babies born out of wedlock accounted for 20% of all births during the period under study. This high infant mortality rate was accompanied by increases in maternal mortality rates as well. In an effort to establish an illegitimacy-mortality connection, Winter and Cole examined the economic and vital statistics in several European cities for the same time period and found both the infant mortality rates and illegitimacy to be lower than those in the United States. However, children born to single mothers in London, Paris, and Berlin suffered the same fate as those of unmarried women in the United States. These children and their parents confronted a welfare system which was inadequate at best. Many of the European children were placed in foster care or in crowded shelters where they were exposed to higher risk of disease leading to higher infant and child mortality rates. One can reasonably argue that mortality

**Table 5**  
**Relative Gains in Life Expectancy at Birth,**  
**Males, African American (AA) versus White American (WH)**  
**by Cause Deleted**

Deleted Cause	AA	WH	(AA-WH)	Percent Difference
HIV-AIDS	.49	.22	.27	4.5
Accidents: Motor Vehicle	.60	.79	-.19	**
Accidents: Other	.75	.54	.21	3.5
Suicide	.24	.50	-.26	**
Homicide, Legal Intervention	1.14	.22	.92	15.4
Malignant Neoplasms:				
Digestive Tract	.81	.70	.11	1.8
Respiratory Tract	1.22	1.15	.07	1.2
Breast	.01	.01	.00	**
Urogenital	.47	.38	.09	1.5
Other	.72	.82	-.10	**
Diabetes Mellitus	.26	.18	.08	1.3
Myocardial Infarction	1.10	1.69	-.58	**
Cerbovascular	.77	.49	.28	4.7
Remaining CV	3.31	2.73	.58	9.7
Pneumonia & Influenza	.38	.26	.12	1.0
Pulmonary Disease	.33	.48	-.15	**
Liver Disease & Cirrhosis	.36	.26	.09	1.6
Perinatal	.79	.32	.47	7.8
All Other Causes	2.92	1.77	1.15	19.2

\*\*White gains from elimination of this cause of death exceed African American gains.

Source: Antonio McDaniel (1990)

**Table VI**  
**Excess Deaths Per Year by Cause of Death**

Heart Disease/Stroke	18,181
Homicide/Accidents	10,909
Cancer	8,118
Infant Deaths	6,178
Chemical Dependency	2,154
Diabetes	1,850

Source: Tunstall, Williams and Holmes (1993)

rates are highly related to both personal and societal economic conditions.

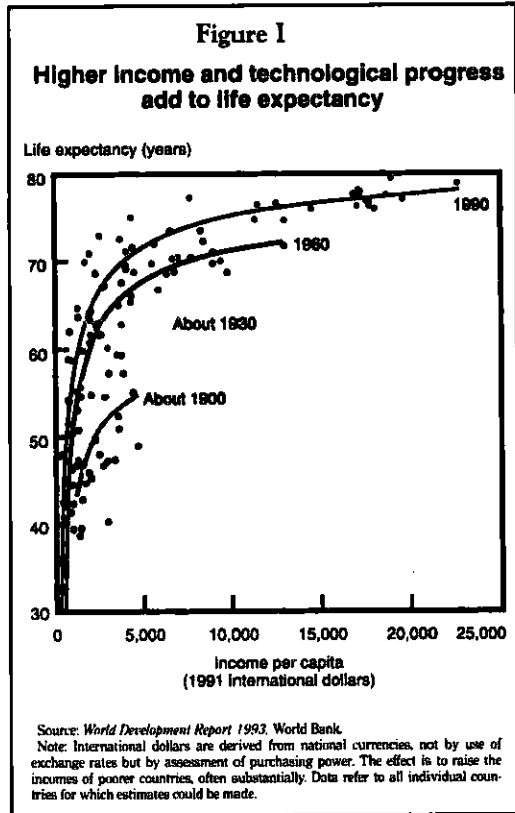
**"Hot-Baths" Hypothesis.** There is almost an axiomatic association between the level of a country's economic development and mortality and survival rates; such rates being significantly leveraged by material advancement (please refer



to Fig.1). For example, the notable differences in life expectancy at birth between former East European Socialist countries and Western European nations is explained by the relatively faster rates of growth and standards of living in the West. In the United States, the African-American economic status has shown little change since the 1940's.

It would be inappropriate to say that the life chances and survival rates for African Americans has not shown some improvement. A case in point would be the infant and child mortality rates which have declined by almost 50 percent, from 32.6 deaths of infants under 1 year of age in 1970 to 18 in 1990. The corresponding numbers for whites are 17.8 and 7.6. The prominent higher starting numbers for blacks explain the larger fall. Relative to whites in this country and other established market economies, African-American rates are still unacceptably high. However, the decline in the African American mortality rates cannot be overlooked and this drop is attributable to better distribution of economic resources in the health care delivery system through programs such as Medicaid.

Fig. I illustrates the positive association between per capita incomes and life expectancy in years. Jee-Peng Tan et al (1994) argue that it is governmental policies outside of the health sector—particularly the ones that affect the macroeconomy, i.e., poverty, education and equal rights which upgrade the health status of a population. The "hot-baths" hypothesis, which states that with an increase in basic creature comforts—food, clothing and shelter—a society's population would automatically level off, and by



implication the mortality rates would fall, has not so far received the attention that it deserves.

Poverty is highly correlated with morbidity as well as mortality. Some 7000 babies are born annually to HIV-positive and AIDS infected women and such babies, more likely than not, test positive too. A disproportionate number of such women are black and poor (Osei, *ibid.*). There is an urgent and real need to change the inner city environment and lifestyle and to help such unfortunate women adopt healthier life styles.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the academic suspicion of comparative race-based data, there is enough unimpeachable evidence to confirm the inferior health and survival predicament of African-Americans. The empirical survival function estimates, or the estimated survival probabilities, clearly establish that at all age intervals black survivals are lower than those of whites. Similarly at all age levels and for almost for every cause of death, black vulnerability is greater.

The quality of life of the average African-American is harsh, and many do not have the economic resources to leave the inner cities, which are plagued with a host of social problems. It is the lack of economic resources that is the most critical underlying reason for the state of unacceptable black health, mortality, and survival rates. It has been documented and even demonstrated that black economic progress could have a positive impact on some of the morbid black health statistics. We have also estimated conservatively the cost of excess deaths to be about \$24 billion per annum. This does not take into account the enormous loss in productivity due to black' poor health, and also the cost of such poor health in terms of treatment, surgery, and medicines. If the hot-baths hypothesis is accepted and acted upon, the problems which affect African Americans and our inner cities would decrease.

Social scientists, especially economists, should begin examining ways in which the economic situation of poor Americans can be improved. We spend a considerable amount of the gross domestic product on problems that are the direct result of an inequitable distribution of resources. Social welfare must again become a priority if we are to increase the life chances of millions of Americans.

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## Leadership for Diversity: The Role of African American Studies in a Multicultural World

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Delores P. Aldridge\*  
Emory University

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It has been relatively easy for advocates of diversity to sidestep questions about the social and historical origins of policies they favor. The idea of diversity seems to have appeared out of nowhere. But the notion of changing institutions so that they better reflect the great range of peoples and experiences in American Culture is not new. In modern times, the most prominent movement for diversity has been the Civil Rights Movement. African American Studies, the intellectual and scholastic offshoot of that movement, initiated the first wide scale effort to broaden racial and social perspectives within the university.

Placing diversity in historical context is important because obscuring the roots of this issue negates the contributions and the importance of African Americans. The Civil Rights Movement and subsequent efforts to present African American life as a legitimate subject of academic study are defining moments in our nation's consciousness of its diverse makeup. This essay is an attempt to recover that neglected legacy and to define the future role of African American Studies in a global world order.

As developing nations like Brazil ponder racial and ethnic relations under democratic conditions, the African American experience stands as an instructive example. The same may be true of South Africa, where an expansive cultural perspective under democratic leadership is all but assured. In these and other situations, African Americans can provide the wisdom of experience gleaned from a

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\*This essay by Delores Aldridge explores the need for African American studies in a contemporary world. *Challenge* strives to publish empirical studies; however, when essays that are germane to African Americans are submitted, we try to accommodate the authors.

generation of pioneering diversity within the world's strongest democracy. The spread of democratic institutions and heightened consciousness among oppressed races are creating conditions for African Americans to provide leadership for the worldwide movement for cultural diversity and individual freedom. Without this acknowledgement of pioneering effort, significant work of African Americans will once again be expunged from the historical record—our role in the future course of social development and human relations unacknowledged. I hope this essay is the beginning of a dialogue to proclaim our commitment to a society with truly diverse institutions. And, I hope it will inspire a fresh examination of the possibilities for leadership African Americans can exert in the future world order.

Diversity is becoming a global reality. America's status as a world leader, and its ability to compete in the next century could well turn on its response to the challenge of diversity. Despite being predicated on lofty political and social ideals, American culture and institutions have not managed diversity very well. In part this is due to a powerful mythology of melting pot opportunity which trivializes legitimate claims of prejudice and inequality. Even more ironically, the very organizations that should be best prepared to meet this challenge—colleges and universities—seem least able to create truly multicultural environments. Today, a generation after struggle began for African American Studies in the university, racial tension and confrontation remain routine features of campus life, just as they continue to permeate society as a whole.

In America, racial tolerance and equality are benchmarks by which diversity must be measured. Without denying the legitimate protestations of other groups, race, not class, gender, or sexual orientation, remains the most unalterable factor in social oppression. Although increased advocacy for language groups, women, gays, and other interests has shifted the focus of diversity to a wider range of targets, race remains the seminal problem in American society.

Along with its mission of research and teaching, the university guards and perpetuates the formal values of our nation. As the main repository for formal knowledge and moral precepts, it has a special responsibility to style itself as a model for society at large. And because higher education serves the leadership class of society, its performance with regard to diversity and equity exerts a powerful influence upon those designated for roles of power, influence, and decision making. Not even life on campus, abstracted from the usual daily struggles and populated by the brightest, most impressionable citizens, has been able to embrace diversity in the academic curriculum as a deeply honored moral imperative.

What a generation of African American students and faculty have discovered is that the university is not so much a molder of society as a reflection of it. When black intellectuals first asserted the validity of academic inquiry focused on issues specific to African Americans, there was resistance. That resistance, in somewhat more subtle form, continues to this day. What should have been an oppor-

tunity to acknowledge real differences of experience and knowledge between black and white lives in a divided society was instead viewed as a power grab by entrenched academic interests. Established departments and their personnel perceived the movement for African American Studies, and the real academic diversity it implied, as an intrusion onto their turf by unwelcome competitors.

Although the debate assumed a lofty tone, just below the surface of flowery rhetoric was the reality of vested economic interests and the management of power relations within the university itself. These interests had an epistemological basis. Acknowledging that the black experience in America has been qualitatively different from that of whites could negate or at least circumscribe the validity of assumptions about American social values. Central among issues raised would be questions about the character of American democracy itself. Delving into this sphere would put the academy at odds with its central political mission: to reinforce and validate social reality. Important though it might have been, this dilemma was actually of tangential importance in the overall scheme of things. The first priority in responding to African American Studies was to preserve the established structure of economic and administrative relations within the university, as well as cultural norms dominant in the society at large.

Thirty years ago neither African American Studies nor its adversaries within the academy could have predicted the radical transformations taking place in the world today. The end of the cold war and East/West political hegemony is ushering in a new era of global realignment. In the next century, most of the world's population growth will occur in countries with non-European cultures. National and ethnic consciousness is on the rise worldwide. Diversity is a global reality; it is driving the creation of a new economic and political order. America is buffeted by these same winds of change. Sometime early in the coming century, a large proportion of the American work force will be non-white. Even sooner, a majority of American schoolchildren are likely to be non-white. The gap in fertility rates between white and non-white populations ensures these trends will continue.

At the same time non-white populations are flexing their demographic strength around the world and at home, American race relations are characterized by increasing segregation, isolation, and enmity. In the future, corporations and the university itself will be drawing new recruits from communities with backgrounds and social attitudes different from the typical middle class white youth. The requirement to accommodate different perspectives and interpretations of social life will become increasingly imperative if American institutions are to make what appears to be an inevitable transition. The failure to embrace fresh, enriching perspectives will no doubt prove a costly error for American society.

Today African American Studies is uniquely positioned to address the diversity issue in America and, by extension, around the globe. The African



American experience from slavery, to emancipation, through Jim Crow oppression, civil rights, black nationalism, and all its other economic and political expressions, has clear application to national struggles waged by oppressed peoples elsewhere. That these experiences have occurred within the Western world's leading democracy can help focus specific economic and political theories likely to have an important impact upon global civilization in the 21st century. Emerging multicultural democracies such as South Africa and Brazil may find the African American experience an especially useful model.

### **A Leading Role For African American Studies.**

Since its origins on the campus of San Francisco State University in the late 1960's, the African American Studies movement has struggled to establish an intellectual mission and epistemological identity. Although firmly rooted on many campuses, the discipline has a tangential relationship with other academic disciplines and departments. Its impact on scholarship has been significant but largely unacknowledged, and programs vary widely in scope, design, and size. But as global changes and demographic trends impose new perspectives on American culture and its educational system, African American Studies, the pioneer in diversity, has already demonstrated its ability to play a leading role in reshaping America's social and intellectual agenda. Not only is African American Studies positioned as the authority on racial issues in this society, its reach can be extended to burgeoning trends with other people of color in America and throughout the world.

In the 21st century, internationalism will be the focus of much economic and political effort. There is growing awareness among blacks in this country that they do not live in isolation from other people of color. African Americans are therefore becoming more conscious of their ties to other non-European peoples, and in the coming century, those linkages should be even more evident. At the same time, the unique perspective blacks have gained as an integral part of American society can provide a bridge between third world sensibilities and American institutions. The pace of global change, and the rapid integration of undeveloped nations into the international political economy provides an ideal opportunity to expand the content and mission of African American Studies.

Global consciousness is particularly urgent at this point in time. Industrial modes of production in advanced nations like the United States are rapidly being replaced by post-industrial service and information oriented industries. As American factories are shut down and manufacturing transferred to underdeveloped nations, the segment of domestic workers most severely impacted contains a high proportion of African Americans. Far more reliant upon blue collar manufacturing jobs for middle class stability, blacks are in de facto competition with other people of color for the work they are best able to perform. The exploitation of offshore labor by global corporations, environmental degradation, and exacerbation

of class divisions in underdeveloped countries are obstacles to their evolution as just and democratic societies.

The so-called black underclass is not an isolated national problem. It is inextricably bound up with the international movement of capital and shifts in social priorities brought about by the changing contours of world economic development. Realities faced by African Americans go far beyond the limits of neighborhood, city, state, region, and nation. Likewise, the general set of concerns—lack of empowerment, disfranchisement—that preoccupy black Americans, are common to a broad set of peoples living under conditions of oppression. There is a pressing need for rigorous theoretical work. A critically focused African American Studies grounded in comparative history, behavioral sciences, and political economy, can generate analytical models that yield fresh, compelling insights into the nature of our oppression, and that of others as well.

Such a mission requires that African American Studies be specific in its research subject, but universal in the scope and application of knowledge. It will be necessary to challenge much of the current curriculum design, which serves an increasingly irrelevant academic status quo. To the extent that it will assume a transformative role African American Studies will be tendentious. It must be an intellectual and pedagogic advocate. This can be accomplished without sacrificing rigor, discipline, and accountability.

### Creating A Web Of Communication

Constructing a dynamic discipline such as that described above will require uniform standards for research, exposition, and meaning within African American Studies. A web of exchange, linking black scholars, students and their communities as well as other important critical scholarship, can provide a vast body of experiential data and theoretical perspectives. This store of information will have draw from different disciplines to discover useful commonalities and instructive contrasts.

Asymptomatic hypertension, for example, affects black people in the United States disproportionately compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Among the various causes postulated to explain this discrepancy is "environmental stress." The medical establishment and the government have made a concerted effort to investigate and control hypertension with medications. The results have not been effective. There seems to be a conscious effort to avoid serious investigation of the impact environmental stress may have on this condition. To do so could raise troubling political issues. Possible linkages between physical illness and environmental factors such as racism, poverty, and oppression challenge existing designs of knowledge. For the status quo it is better for hypertension to be viewed as an individual medical problem than a mark of oppression—a social problem with individual medical manifestations.

A grounding in critical theory augmented by global consciousness would

present a number of possibilities for addressing this problem. Scholars could ponder, for example, the comparative statistics for blacks living in other countries insofar as rates of hypertension are concerned. Such comparisons, properly controlled, could have measurable impact on the quality of life and health for blacks in American society. Linking African American studies and broader frames of reference will allow the leap toward high level research of the sort suggested above. Bringing to bear specialized knowledge of history and economics, social and behavioral sciences, policy analysis, linguistics, and other disciplines, problems endemic to the black American population can be illuminated within a network of relations that place African Americans in a clearer relationship with the rest of the world.

There is a particular need to attack social myths that exert a pernicious hold over both the academic community and American society. It is a powerful fact that even under conditions of bondage, Africans in America managed to maintain a strong attachment to family structure. Newly freed slaves embraced the institution of marriage with such enthusiasm that by the end of the nineteenth century, upwards of black children were born to married couples. In subsequent decades, through countless acts of deliberate economic and political disfranchisement, black family stability was steadily eroded. Today, black families and gender relations in black communities are in crisis, but so are family relations and gender relations in the larger society. The question is, what marginalizing changes have occurred in recent history causing mainstream families to demonstrate characteristics similar to those in oppressed and disfranchised black communities? As the doors of economic opportunity slam for white Americans due to international competition, their family bonds are transformed. As economic conditions force white mothers out of the home and into the work force, mainstream families are undergoing fundamental structural changes. The extreme marginalization and improvisations forced on blacks in contemporary American society may prove an accurate predictor of changes awaiting an even larger segment of American society as we face the economic dislocations in the 21st century. It is the task of African American Studies to seize on such insights, conduct required research, invalidate existing models, produce visionary policy proposals, and postulate new models of social organization. A unique grounding in the experiences of America's historically oppressed minority can, at this moment in history, produce the keen insight required to dissect ongoing social and economic transformation—an insight that should prove instructive for maximizing the options of other oppressed groups.

To reach its potential as an academic discipline and intellectual pursuit, African American Studies cannot define "blackness" in fixed terms. We live in a dynamic universe, and the experiences of black folk are being transformed along with the rest of the world. African American Studies is not and should not be dominated by a fixed precept of racial identity. Its mission is to develop a set of

cognitive values which distinguish the black experience as a unique intellectual subject, yet is open to participation and inquiry by all interested parties. This is a significant challenge. Internal criteria defining the discipline's intellectual mission are not enough. Our scholars must put forth original concepts for historical interpretation and social change that establish our linkages to other segments of America's increasingly multi-cultural order. The focus must be simultaneously microcosmic and macrocosmic. A dynamic, reflexive methodology will produce a compelling vision of society, and position African American ideals at the forefront of progressive thinking in the next century.

African American Studies has been treated with disdain, even contempt by the American academic community. Pioneers in the field have been refused the acknowledgement and professional regard they are due. Higher learning in America is the poorer for that. The university has failed to enthusiastically embrace a new and potentially enriching perspective. It has failed to demonstrate the flexibility, openness, and grounding in reality evident in the revised strategies of this country's global corporations. Most disturbingly, the university, in contrast to the business community, continues to exhibit a reluctance to hasty change and innovation.

A renewed emphasis on race is in order. Racial divisions in American society are as tense today as any time in modern history. American universities and the society itself face a burgeoning racial dilemma. The high level of racial polarization on campus and in the streets is just one sign of unabating trouble. Yet, for the most part, African American Studies has been overshadowed by better funded programs focusing on women, gays, and other groups. Even granting they are valid areas of inquiry in their own rights, one reason for the attraction of these curricula may be that they divert attention and resources from African American Studies. However, none of these fields addresses the seminal social problem still faced by American society: the problem of the color line.

The potential of African American Studies as a rich trove of transformative knowledge is undiminished. That potential, like many aspects of African American life, is simply underdeveloped. In the 21st Century, issues of race and social equity will confront American society like a Hydra. In African American Studies, higher education has a neglected, but powerful tool for expanding intellectual boundaries.

### **Toward A Way Out.**

It is time for higher education to embrace African American Studies as an aggressive, focused, transformative academic discipline which pioneered the diversity movement. Specifically, African American Studies needs to be accepted as a solution, a course of study which addresses one of the nation's most enduring and tenacious problems. Campuses are being compelled to reevaluate race relations in a context of accelerating diversity. African American Studies

can assume a leading role in that process, providing the grounding in racial realities everyone needs to be considered a truly educated American .

With an appropriate level of resource support and status confirmation, African American Studies can address issues of racial and cultural diversity in ways that can serve as a model for other disciplines. It has the platform to address issues of racism and oppression directly, from the perspective of its historical victims, within the belly of the beast. It alone can transcend the celebratory emphasis of "Black History Month" and other well-meaning, but superficial concepts. They address symptoms, but do not grasp the depth of America's racial dilemma. African American Studies exemplifies a clear, practical, emphatic course of action: infusing all curricula from K-12 to the university with diverse knowledge representing the different perspectives, experiences, and issues facing black and oppressed people in the world. Such an approach can preserve scholastic rigor and intellectual discipline, while accessing important knowledge ignored by traditional courses. For example, traditional social stratification courses too often focus on culturally different behavior and social class without forthrightly dealing with the socially determined role of race in structures of inequality. The role race plays in complicating concepts of culture and class appears less powerful in study than it does in the world of lived experience. African American Studies has the potential to correct this discrepancy between what is formally taught and what is intuitively known to be true.

As racial tension, hostility, and conflict experience a resurgence on campus and throughout the larger society, an opportunity exists for African American Studies to recapture its pioneer role in diversity leadership. Seminars and workshops on prejudice reduction cannot address the underlying, structural causes of persistent racism. In fact, such exercises, by focusing on individual attitudes and preferences, mask core problems. Intermittent courses on race relations modified from traditional course offerings have the same effect. In their case, gatekeepers and ideological paradigms grounded in the status quo are charged with changing that very status quo. Mere courses on contributions made by blacks and other minorities do not address the central issue.

Of critical import is the issue of color; its role in power relations, allocation of resources, and impact on the resulting configuration of society. This realm of inquiry must be elevated from a "discipline of disciplines" to an autonomous, respected intellectual endeavor. What is our past, present, and future "fit" in American society and the world? That is the seminal question for African American Studies. Its pioneering history, enriched by continuing innovation, makes African American Studies a model for all the "new studies." At the same time, its human focus probes broader questions of what kind of world is to exist in the future. A transformed academic discipline can point the way toward a more transformed university. That would be good for our people, good for the nation, and good for the emerging world culture of the next century.

## About the Authors

**Dr. Delores P. Aldridge** is Grace Towns Hamilton Professor of Sociology and African American Studies at Emory University in Atlanta. She is one of the nation's leading scholars in the growing field of social diversity and multiculturalism. The author of more than 199 books, essays, articles, monographs, and reports, she is currently writing a book analyzing the role played by African American Studies as a pacesetter for the diversity movement.

**Dr. S.V. Char** is Professor of Economics and Research Fellow at the Southern Center for Studies in Public Policy at the Clark Atlanta University. His research interests center on factors associated with salary disparities and spatial mismatch of jobs and workers.


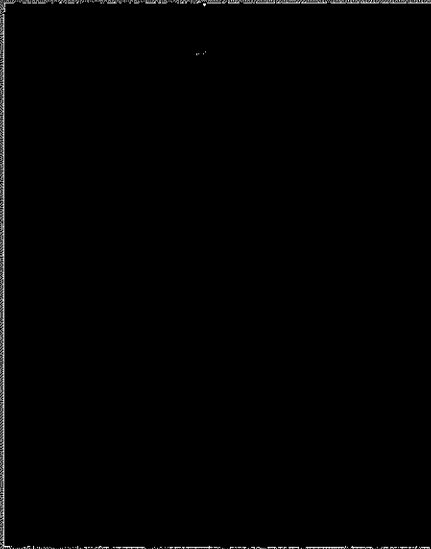
**Obie Clayton** is Director of the Morehouse Research and Associate Professor of Sociology at Morehouse College. His research focuses on criminology, statistics, and social change. He has more than twenty articles published in scholarly journals and has served as a consultant to the Georgia Department of Defender Rehabilitation, the Georgia Department of Youth Services, Division of Youth Services; and the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority.

**Dr. Jack K. Martin** is a senior research scientist and the director of the Survey Research Center at the University of Georgia. His research focuses on the interaction of workplace structures and worker dispositions as this process influences behaviors at work and off the job. He is co-editor, with Steven Tuch, of the forthcoming *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*.

**Dr. Philip Secret** is Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and former Associate Dean of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service. He is the author of thirty papers dealing with race and public relations, race and criminal sentencing and factors contributing to juvenile delinquency.

**Lee Sigelman** is Professor of Political Science and chair of the department at the George Washington University. He has previously served on the faculty of Texas Tech University, the University of Kentucky and the University of Arizona, and as Director of the Political Science Program at the National Science Foundation. He has written extensively on political and racial attitudes, and is co-author, with Susan Welch, of *Black Americans' View of Racial Inequality: The Dream Deferred*.

**Dr. Steven A. Tuch** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the George Washington University. His research focuses on trends in racial attitudes, including the attitudes of blacks and whites toward policies designed to ameliorate racial inequality. He is co-editor, with Jack K. Martin, of the forthcoming *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*.



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