The Police and Public Discourse on "Black-on-Black" Violence

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Introduction

Police departments, especially in urban jurisdictions, are often called on to quell outbreaks of serious violence such as sudden increases in homicides, aggravated assaults and robberies. Inner-city residents and their children usually suffer the most serious harm when violent crime waves occur. Unfortunately, due to a long history of exclusion from important economic and social opportunities, residents of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods are primarily minorities and often black. Research has long documented that most violence occurs within racial groups and that black Americans, often victimized by black offenders, experience disproportionately high levels of violent crime. The term "black-on-black" violence, while statistically correct, is a simplistic and emotionally charged definition of urban violence that can be problematic when used by political commentators, politicians and police executives. To the vast majority of urban black residents who are not involved in violence or criminal behavior, the term invokes visions of indiscriminate and aggressive police enforcement responses applied to a broad range of black people. The term also

seems to marginalize serious urban violence as a "black problem" that, in the minds of some black residents, may only receive a cursory response or, worse yet, be ignored by police departments entirely.

We believe that most police departments in the U.S. are dedicated to reducing violence, investigating crimes, and protecting victims irrespective of race. However, poor analyses and inappropriate descriptions of urban violent crime problems can sometimes lead to the adoption of problematic policing policies and programs. Moreover, careless discussions of the nature of urban violence can further alienate law-abiding black residents who need and desperately want to partner with the police to create safer communities. In this paper, we briefly describe how news media coverage sometimes distorts racial issues, present a (hopefully) more cool-headed analysis of black-on-black violence (measured as a homicide problem), and consider how misconceptions of black-on-black violence coupled with over- and/or under-policing of black neighborhoods can further erode citizen confidence in the police.

The Distorting Role of Mass News Media Coverage of Urban Violence

As Surette (1998) suggests, what most Americans know about crime and justice comes from popular media's portrayal of these subjects. Unfortunately,

media outlets have an interest in presenting crime and justice issues in a way that captivates audiences and stimulates passions. Even though crime has steadily decreased over the last two decades, personal safety remains high on the list of public concerns, in part, because citizen perceptions are influenced by news media sources intentionally designed to make us feel passionately about the subject (Surette, 1998; Crayton and Glickman, 2007). Obviously, there are many positive aspects of intensive, fervent coverage of crime and justice issues: untended crime problems may be addressed, miscarriages of justice may be corrected, victims and their families may receive relief, and other public goods may be generated.

However, the media can also distort crime and justice issues by constructing attitudes and perceptions that do not match the reality of contemporary crime problems. Media distortions of the reality of black-on-black violence in cities can take many forms. Persistent coverage of homicides and shootings in black neighborhoods without appropriate contextual information can perpetrate inaccurate stereotypes of blacks as innately violent people. When media outlets provide extensive coverage of homicides involving white victims, especially white female victims, but little ongoing coverage of homicides involving black victims, it promotes a perception among black citizens that killings of black people are less important than killings of white people. And, by unfortunate association, that the police are not devoting, or do not think they need to

devote, sufficient resources to investigate black victim homicides.

A casual sampling of characterizations of black-on-black violence in the media by political commentators, politicians and police chiefs reveals persistently vague definitions of the phenomenon and occasionally problematic associations with ideas about morally bankrupt behaviors in black families and communities.

Jason Riley, Columnist, Wall Street Journal[1]

"The black crime rate in 1960 was lower than it is today ... Was there less racism or less poverty than in 1960? This is about black behavior. It needs to be addressed head-on. It's about attitudes toward the criminal justice system in these neighborhoods, where young black men have no sense of what it means to be a male or what it means to be black."

Chris Wallace, Political Commentator, Fox News[2]

"The president talked ... about black-on-black crime. And as I looked into this, the numbers are just staggering ... should the African American community be focusing on that, the black-on-black crime, the carnage in our inner cities and not on George Zimmerman? ... When you have people demanding, 'Let's go after George Zimmerman,' hate crimes, economic boycotts of Florida, that isn't talking about the real problems in the inner city."

Rahm Emanuel, Mayor, City of Chicago[3]

"The issue of gun violence is not limited to Chicago ... It's an urban problem." The urban violence, Emanuel said, "gets put in a different value system. These are our kids, these are our children, and the worst thing for us to do in my opinion would be to say, 'Let's not discuss this.' We need to make sure that once a crime is committed, we don't allow them back on the street to become perpetrators or victims. ... A piece of this is the culture ... Part of this is having an honest conversation, given the lion's share of the victims and the perpetrators are young African-American men."

Michael Bloomberg, former Mayor, City of New York[4]

"Ninety percent of all people killed in our city — and 90 percent of all those who commit the murders and other violent crimes — are black and Hispanic. It is shameful that so many elected officials and editorial writers have been largely silent on these facts ... Instead, they have argued that police stops are discriminatory because they do not reflect the city's overall census numbers. By that flawed logic, our police officers would stop women as often as men, and senior citizens as often as young people ... To do so would be a colossal misdirection of resources and would take the core elements of police work — targeting high-crime neighborhoods and identifying suspects based on evidence — out of crime-fighting ... . The absurd result of such a strategy

would be far more crimes committed against black and Latino New Yorkers. When it comes to policing, political correctness is deadly."

Ray Kelly, former Commissioner, New York Police Department[5]

"The stark reality is that crime happens in communities of color ... About 70% to 75% of the people described as committing violent crimes — assault, robbery, shootings, grand larceny — are described as being African-American." ... "The percentage of people who are stopped is 53% African-American ... So really, African-Americans are being under stopped in relation to the percentage of people being described as being the perpetrators of violent crime."

There are certainly other concerning perspectives put forth in the popular media on this issue. It is important to recognize, however, that some police chiefs steer clear of vague black-on-black violence descriptions by focusing on "disparate victimization" in black disadvantaged neighborhoods. For instance:

Edward A. Flynn, Chief, Milwaukee Police Department[6]

"Here's what's disproportionate to me ... With about 40 percent of Milwaukee's population, African-Americans represent 80 percent of our homicide victims. They represent 60 percent of our robbery victims and 80 percent of our aggravated assault victims." ... "It's as though the arresting of African-Americans

takes place in a vacuum ... If I draw an ellipse over our poorest neighborhoods and then find an ellipse and draw it where our most 911 calls are, and then draw the ellipse over where most of our crime victims are ... it's the same neighborhoods and the same zip codes."

Nevertheless, the explicit and implicit promotion of inaccurate and vague descriptions is generally offensive to black Americans.

Before we begin to analyze the issue more closely, it is worth noting what black-on-black homicide is not. We believe the following ideas are wrong and ultimately not helpful.

- *Black-on-black homicide is random.* The term "random" is commonly defined as "proceeding, made, or occurring without definite aim, reason, or pattern."[7] The perspective that black-on-black homicide is not patterned lends itself to an interpretation that any citizen could spontaneously be the victim of a horrendous crime at any place or any time. The promotion of this misunderstanding may result in heightened fear of violence among black residents and visitors to majority black neighborhoods. Increased fear of violence may undermine the full participation of black residents in neighborhood life and lead to weakened community control over local youth and public spaces.

- *Black-on-black homicide problems are symptomatic of persistent lawless behavior by black people.* This wrongheaded idea

leads to an implicit assumption among the public that a high proportion of black residents are involved in crime and disorder. This misperception promotes uncertainty regarding whether blacks share the moral standards of mainstream society and, as a result, diminishes levels of mainstream concern and determination to find evidence-based responses to the problem.

- *Black-on-black homicide problems are driven by black people's tolerance for criminal and immoral behavior.* This false perspective can influence police officers to mistakenly view entire black neighborhoods as supportive of criminal behavior and exacerbate an already fragile relationship.

## Black Homicide Victimization and Black Homicide Offending Rates

In this section, we focus on black and white comparisons. This crude categorization stems from a lack of crime data that consistently classify information for Hispanics and non-Hispanics as well as for Asians and Native Americans (Lauritsen and Sampson, 1998). Consequently, most analysis of disparity and discrimination in crime and criminal justice has focused on comparisons between blacks and whites. In general, the available scientific evidence on crime victimization suggests the following patterns:

- Blacks suffer much higher rates of personal violence and violent victimization than whites.[8] As discussed in greater detail below, this is particularly true for homicide victimization.

- Racial differences are reduced substantially for household crimes and personal theft victimization.

- Although whites represent the majority of suspects arrested for all crimes, blacks are disproportionately more likely to be arrested for violent crimes, especially homicide, relative to their share of the U.S. population.[9]

Between 1980 and 2008, blacks were disproportionately represented as both homicide victims and offenders (Cooper and Smith, 2011). The homicide victimization rate for blacks (27.8 per 100,000) was six times higher than the rate for whites (4.5 per 100,000) (figure 1). Blacks accounted for slightly more than 51 percent of all gun homicide victims between 1980 and 2008, despite representing only about 13 percent of the U.S. population. The homicide offending rate for

Figure 1. Homicide Victimization Rates, by Race, 1980-2008
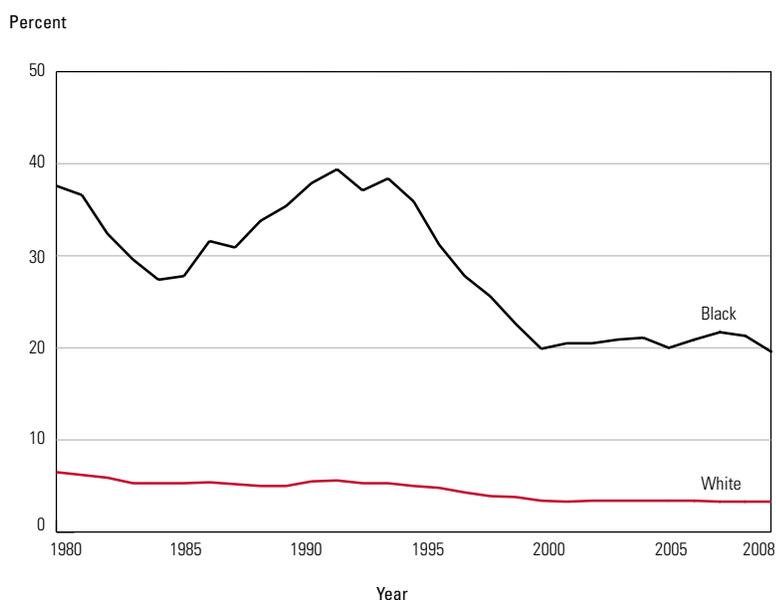
Source: Cooper and Smith (2011: 11).

Figure 2. Homicide Offending Rated by Race, 1980-2008
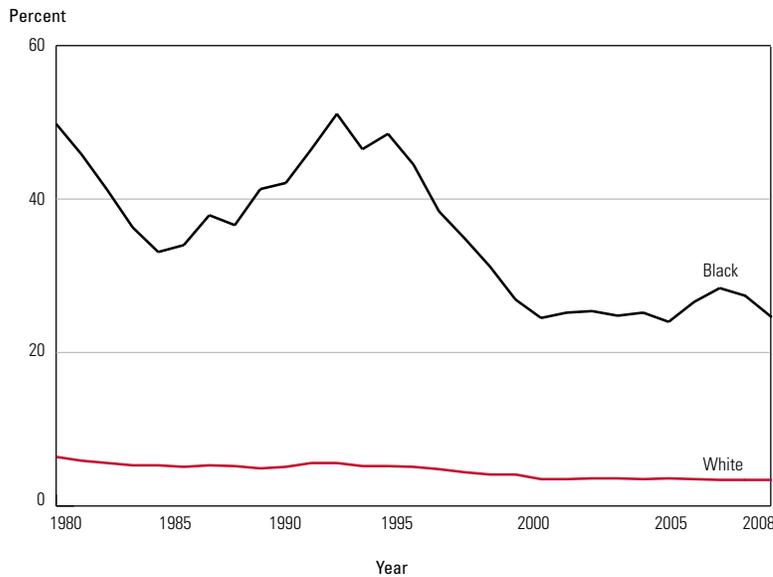
Source: Cooper and Smith (2011: 11).

Figure 3. Homicides, by Race of Offender and Victim, 1980-2008
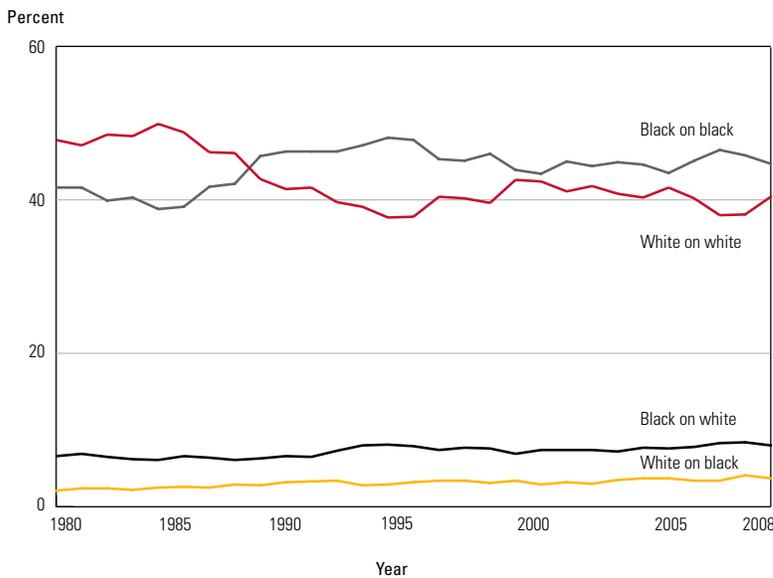
Source: Cooper and Smith (2011: 13).

blacks (34.4 per 100,000) was almost eight times higher than the rate for whites (4.5 per 100,000) (figure 2). The vast majority of homicides are intra-racial, with 84 percent of white victims killed by whites and 93 percent of black victims killed by blacks (figure 3). Black males between the ages of 18 and 24 are dramatically overrepresented in homicide. Homicides of young black males in this age category peaked at 195.9 victimizations per 100,000 in 1993 and subsequently declined to 91.1 victimizations per 100,000 in 2008. Homicides by young adult black males peaked at 365 offenders per 100,000 in 1993 and subsequently declined to 175.8 offenders per 100,000 in 2008.

Black homicide victimizations are less likely to be cleared by arrest than white homicide victimizations. A recent analysis of 2000-2007 homicide data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) reported that 57.2 percent of white homicide victim cases were cleared by arrest while only 50.6 percent of black homicide victim cases were cleared by arrest (Roberts and Lyons, 2011). In general, the circumstances of homicide incidents powerfully influence clearance rates. For example, offenders in gang-related and drug-related homicides are much less likely to be arrested by homicide detectives (Wellford and Cronin, 2000), in part due to lack of witness cooperation. Further, black males are more likely than white males to be involved in these kinds of homicide incidents (Cook and Laub, 2002). Without citizens coming forward to provide detectives with much needed information, investigations of gang and drug homicides can hit dead ends quickly, with no substantive leads.

Some analysts suggest that the killings of black male victims receive less investigative time and effort from homicide detectives (Roberts and Lyons, 2011), whereas others suggest that white female homicide victims receive more investigative time and effort (Holcomb, Williams, and Demuth, 2004). Most available research on clearance rates finds little evidence of homicide detectives valuing or devaluing victims based on race (Puckett and Lundman, 2003; Litwin, 2004; Lundman and Myers, 2012), but there are some noteworthy exceptions. For instance, a multivariate analysis of homicides in Los Angeles County between 1990 and 1994 suggested that white homicide victims received additional investigation attention and, as a result, their cases were more likely to be solved than those involving nonwhite homicide victims (Lee, 2005).

The extremely high homicide victimization and offending rates for young black males in the early 1990s has been tied to gun violence epidemics tipped off by the initiation of crack cocaine sales in most U.S. cities during the late 1980s (Blumstein, 1995; Braga, 2003; Cork, 1999). Although the intensity of black homicide rates has changed over the last century, the persistence of the black-white homicide rate gap has not (Hawkins, 1999). Criminologists have long considered the reasons for observed racial disparities in violence and have put forth a variety of explanations, including individual factors (most notably, IQ and self-control), family socialization, subculture of violence and economic deprivation theories (see, e.g., Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985). Unfortunately, most of these perspectives have been unsatisfactory in explaining observed differences in homicide victimization and offending rates for young black and white males. As summarized by Lauritsen and Sampson (1998: 65-66):

> Constitutional explanations are problematic on empirical grounds — the variations within any minority group are greater than the variations between them. Although there is good evidence that family socialization influences children's delinquency and aggressive behavior patterns, there is no consistent evidence that factors such as lack of supervision and erratic/harsh discipline account for race differences in crime when socioeconomic conditions are taken into account. Subcultural explanations of group variation in offending have yet to show that black and white Americans differ significantly in their values and attitudes regarding crime, or that these differences in values have an independent influence on offending disparities. Finally, research emphasizing access to the legitimate economic system typically finds that race differences persist even after controlling for socioeconomic status.

Another diagnostic approach is to examine the community-level underpinnings of racial disparities in violent crime to identify the neighborhood characteristics that lead to high rates of violence (Sampson and Wilson, 1985). Empirical evidence suggests that the capacity of neighborhood residents to achieve a common set of goals and exert control over youth and public spaces, termed "collective efficacy,"

protects against serious violence (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997). The presence of community-based organizations, which draw membership from individuals within and outside specific neighborhoods, predicts collective efficacy and collective civic action (Sampson, 2012). Concentrated disadvantage in urban neighborhoods, which are often populated by black residents, undermines local collective efficacy and gravely limits the ability of residents to address serious violent crime problems (Sampson and Wilson, 1985). As a result, urban homicides, largely committed with guns and perpetrated by and against young black men, tend to concentrate in disadvantaged black neighborhoods.

Urban environments experience the largest proportion of homicides, and black Americans tend to make up larger shares of urban populations relative to suburban and rural areas. Between 1980 and 2008, nearly 58 percent of homicides occurred in U.S. cities with a population of 100,000 or more (Cooper and Smith, 2011). More than one-third of all homicides in the U.S. during that same time period occurred in cities with one million or more residents. City-level analyses provide an important opportunity to understand the nature of homicide problems better. While useful in describing objective information on homicide incidents such as age, race, sex and weapon type, national data systems, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation's *Supplementary Homicide Reports,* are well-known to be limited in providing reliable and valid information on homicide circumstances

and relationships between victims and offenders (Braga, Piehl and Kennedy, 1999; Maxfield, 1989; Riedel and Zahn, 1985). Careful within-city research on homicide facilitates a deeper understanding of the situations, dynamics and relationships associated with elevated rates of black homicide victimization and offending.

## City-Level Analysis of Black Homicide Victims and Black Homicide Offenders

We use detailed data on homicides in Boston to examine the nature of black homicide victimization and offending in urban settings. Although modest differences are associated with variations in local dynamics across other U.S. cities, the basic picture of black homicide victimization as highly concentrated among a small number of active offenders involved in high-risk social networks is essentially the same. Research has consistently documented that violence driven by conflicts within and among gangs, drug-selling crews and other criminally active groups generate the bulk of urban homicide problems (see, e.g., Block and Block, 1993; Kennedy, Piehl and Braga, 1996; Papachristos, 2009; Tita et al., 2004).

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 24 percent of Boston's estimated 618,000 residents identified themselves as black. Between 2000 and 2013, Boston experienced 836 homicides. Nearly 74 percent of Boston homicide victims were black (615 of 836), and roughly 68 percent of arrested homicide offenders were also black (294 of 430). In cleared black homicides (218, 35.4 percent of 615), 91.7 percent of the offenders were black

(200 of 218). As figure 4 shows, the year-to-year variation in total homicide counts in Boston is largely driven by black homicide victimization rates.

Black homicide victims were primarily young (mean age = 26.6 years, 54 percent were age 24 and younger), overwhelmingly male (91.1 percent), and usually died from gunshot wounds (84.1 percent). Arrested black homicide offenders were also primarily young (mean age = 25.0 years, 59.5 percent were age 24 and younger) and overwhelmingly male (94.2 percent). In addition, 78 percent of black homicide victims (480 of 615) and almost 90 percent of arrested black homicide offenders (264 of 294) were known to the Massachusetts criminal justice system before the homicide incident. Black homicide victims and arrested black homicide offenders known to the criminal justice system averaged, respectively, 12.4 and 12.7 prior arraignments in Massachusetts courts for a variety of violent, drug, property and disorder offenses. So these

Figure 4. Total Homicide Victims and Black Homicide Victims in Boston, 2000-2013
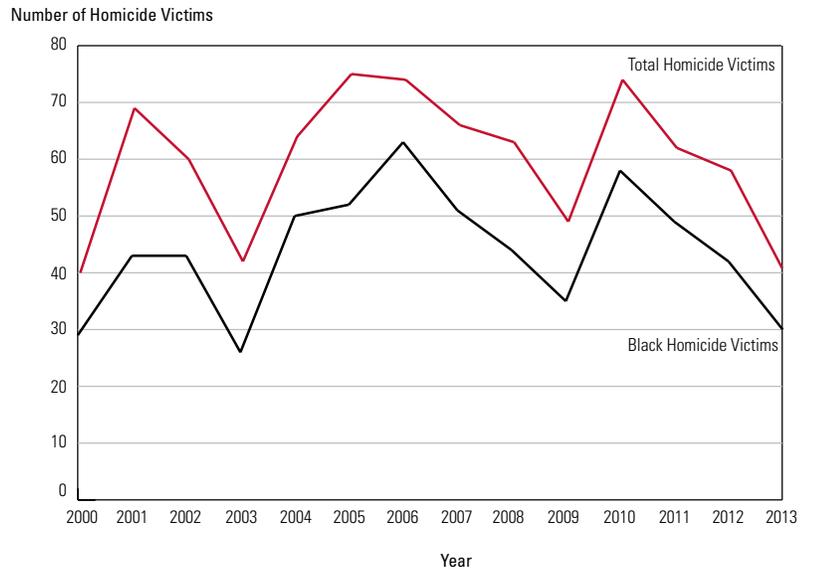

two groups — homicide offenders and victims — are essentially the same. Figure 5 (page 10) shows the previous criminal justice system involvement of known black homicide victims and known arrested black homicide offenders. Probation supervision, commitments to secure facilities

Circumstances of Boston Homicide Victims by Race, 2000-2013

Circumstances	Non-Hispanic Black		Non-Hispanic White	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Gang-related	315	55.0	4	4.4
Personal dispute/argument	95	16.6	34	37.8
Drug-related	84	14.7	14	15.6
Family/domestic violence	34	5.9	11	12.2
Robbery	16	2.8	16	17.8
Other/unknown	29	5.9	11	12.2
Total	573	100.0	90	100.0

Note: Percentages may not add up because of rounding.

Figure 5. Criminal Justice System Involvement of Known Black Homicide Victims and Known Arrested Black Homicide Offenders in Boston, 2000-2013
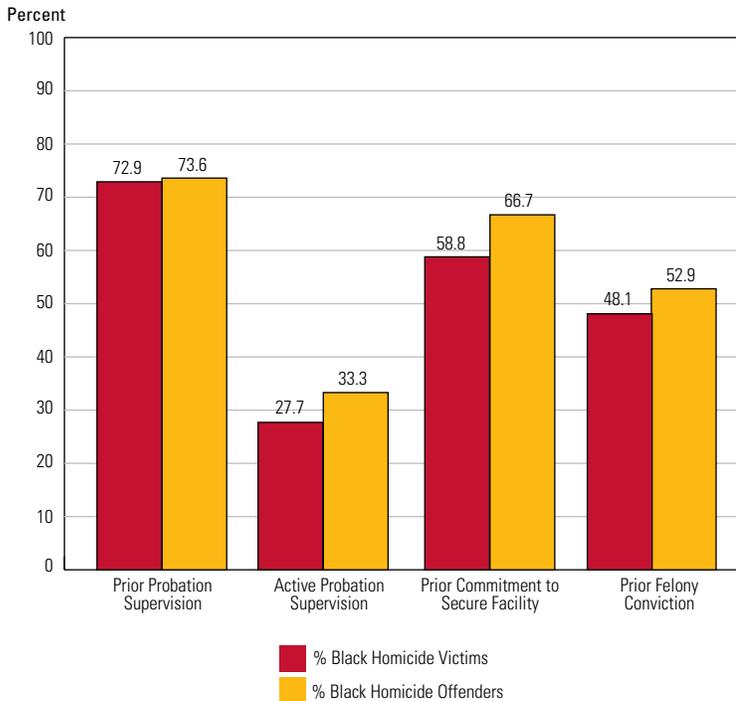
Note: *N* = 480 for known black homicide victims; *N* = 265 for known arrested black homicide offenders.

and felony convictions characterized the prior criminal justice system experiences of both of these groups.

A majority of black homicide victims (78.9 percent, 485 of 618) were killed in the Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhoods of Boston. Inhabitants of these areas are mostly black, and these communities are characterized by high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Homicides are not evenly spread throughout these neighborhoods, though. In fact, most streets did not experience any homicide incidents between 2000 and 2013. Rather, black homicide incidents tend to recur in very specific places, such as in and around public housing dwellings, gang turfs and street drug markets. A recent analysis by Braga, Papachristos and Hureau (2010) revealed

that only 5 percent of Boston's street blocks and intersections experienced nearly 74 percent of all fatal and nonfatal shootings in the city between 1980 and 2008. The most violent 60 street blocks and intersections experienced more than 1,000 shootings during this time period.

Boston, like many cities, suffers gang-related violence that tends to generate a large number of black homicide victims. The table on page 9 presents the circumstances of 573 non-Hispanic black and 90 non-Hispanic white homicide victims killed in Boston between 2000 and 2013. The share of gang-related homicides accounts for the greatest difference in the circumstances of white and black homicides. Few Boston black male youths are gang members. The most recent estimate, in 2006, suggests that only 1 percent of Boston's population between the ages of 14 and 24 (Braga, Hureau and Winship, 2008) were members of street gangs involved in gun violence. However, black male youth participation in these high-risk social networks that promote violent norms to settle disputes puts them at elevated risk of becoming a perpetrator or a victim of fatal gun violence.

A recent study analyzed detailed police records to map the social networks of 763 individuals in one Boston community, using non-arrest observations to create links between individuals (the nodes) who were observed hanging out together (Papachristos, Braga and Hureau, 2012). The study found that 85 percent of all shootings in this community occur within the observed network (less than 3 percent of total neighborhood population)—nearly all of which are driven by 10

different gangs, also observed in the network. The risk of fatal and nonfatal gun victimization within the network spreads outward from other shooting victims to infect their friends and associates. In fact, each "handshake" closer one is to a shooting victim increases one's own probability of getting shot by approximately 25 percent (figure 6).

Boston Police Department (BPD) homicide detectives cleared 50.9 percent of all homicide victimizations by arrest or exceptional circumstances, such as the subsequent suicide or murder of the offender, between 2000 and 2013 (426 of 836 homicide victims). Incidents involving homicides of white non-Hispanic victims had an 80.0 percent clearance rate (72 of 90 non-Hispanic white homicide victims). However, BPD homicide detectives only cleared 35.9 percent of non-Hispanic black homicide victims during this same time period (204 of 573 non-Hispanic black homicide victims). This disparity seems to be strongly influenced by very low clearance rates for gang-related homicides. Only 26.0 percent of gang-related non-Hispanic black homicides (82 of 315) were cleared by arrest or exceptional circumstances between 2000 and 2013. Data derived from qualitative interviews with BPD homicide detectives suggest that low levels of witness cooperation in gang homicide cases, driven by citizen fear of violent reprisals or participation in criminal social networks with norms against sharing information with the police, seriously limit investigators' ability to make arrests in these kinds of cases.

It is worth noting here that the criminal dynamics that characterize high levels of homicides and

Figure 6. Social Networks of High-Risk Individuals in a Boston Community, 2008
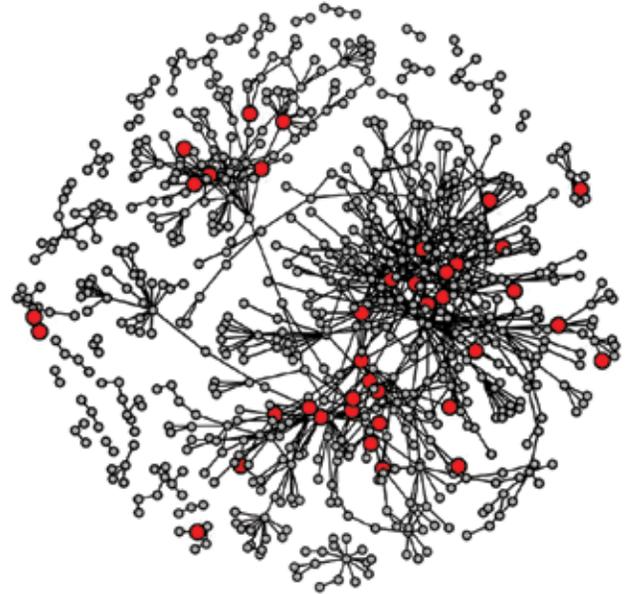
Source: Papachristos, Braga and Hureau (2012: 998).
Note: Grey nodes represent individuals in the network. Red nodes represent individuals in the network who suffered a fatal or nonfatal gunshot wound.

lower clearance rates in black neighborhoods are not race-based. Indeed, disadvantaged white neighborhoods of Boston have been known to exhibit similar patterns of violence and lack of cooperation with the police. For instance, the Charlestown, South Boston and North End neighborhoods of Boston were noted strongholds of Irish and Italian organized crime organizations during the 1960s through the 1980s that were characterized by repeated, unsolved killings by warring factions of the organizations (Lehr and O'Neill, 2000; MacDonald, 1999; O'Neill and Lehr, 1989). Criminal subcultures that embrace violent norms in settling disputes and promote anti-police attitudes exist in impoverished neighborhoods with varied racial compositions. However, black neighborhoods suffer higher rates of this kind of criminal network violence due to

the more intense concentration of disadvantage in these neighborhoods (Sampson and Wilson, 1985).

How Weak Descriptions Further Erode Community Trust and Confidence

Research and analysis thus reveal that black-on-black homicide, and by extension more general black-on-black violence, is largely concentrated among a small number of criminally active individuals and occurs in a small number of high-risk settings within disadvantaged neighborhoods. It is important to remember, however, that many black homicide victims are not involved in any criminal activity. For instance, in 2009, 15-year-old Soheil Turner was waiting for his early morning school bus in Boston's Dudley Square near the Orchard Gardens (formerly Orchard Park) housing development. Turner was not involved in gangs. Nevertheless, he was shot once in the back of the head by 18-year-old Xzeniyeju Chukwuezi, a member of the Dudley Street Posse looking to send a message to the rival Orchard Park Trailblazers. Tragedies like this, involving innocent bystanders, occur too frequently in cities across the U.S. All homicide victims and offenders, regardless of their status as criminals or not, are members of someone's family. In disadvantaged neighborhoods with limited opportunities, many otherwise promising youth become involved in criminal activities. And whether they are lost to ghastly street violence or to the justice system, family and friends will grieve over their absence.

As we noted earlier, commentators routinely refer to eruptions of violence in minority, disadvantaged neighborhoods as the black-on-black violence problem. We acknowledge that this designation is undeniably statistically accurate, given that most interpersonal violence involves victims and offenders of the same race. However, this higher-level statistical view can blind us to the details of the specific problems and dynamics that drive these statistics.

Seldom are crimes involving whites described as white-on-white violence. Use of this vernacular to describe blacks' victimization of other blacks has several important consequences. First, a singular focus on a rudimentary race-based dyad characterizing black offending and victimization has the potential to devalue black life while overshadowing the importance of harmful social conditions, such as concentrated neighborhood disadvantage and low collective efficacy (Sampson, 2012) that collectively produce crime. Second, casual use of the black-on-black violence classification may lead segments of the public to implicitly assume that blacks are more tolerant of crime and disorder and do not share the moral standards of mainstream society.

Further, tensions between the police and minority communities are worsened when frustrated public officials hold press conferences following high-profile homicides, chastising residents of black neighborhoods for not coming forward with information, unwittingly calling into question the black community's fundamental sense of decency or commitment to citizenship. Such proclamations about blacks' unwavering reticence to assist the police are not

only inflammatory, they are also exaggerated. In fact, blacks comprise a sizable proportion of prosecution witnesses and routinely petition criminal justice officials for increased attention to community violence, irrespective of family and friendship relationships with offenders (Donziger, 1996; Tonry, 1995).

Evolving Police Strategies to Engage Minority Communities

The evolution of policing strategies is highly relevant to the effective treatment of these issues. Through the adoption of community and problem-oriented policing, the way police departments deliver services in urban communities in general, and disadvantaged communities in particular, has changed dramatically over the last 30 years (Skogan and Frydl, 2004). By the beginning of the 2000s, nearly all large urban police departments reported having a community policing program in place (Hickman and Reaves, 2001). Police are now more open to input from communities, deal with a wider range of complex social problems, and rely on partnerships more heavily. In general, broad-based community policing initiatives have been found to reduce fear of crime and improve the relationships between the police and the communities they serve (Skogan and Frydl, 2004; Weisburd and Eck, 2004). Modern police departments are also more likely to systematically analyze the nature of crime problems, develop tailored responses to those problems, and engage a diverse set of strategies and partners in their implemented responses. Indeed, a growing body of scientific evidence confirms the crime control value of innovative police strategies such as

problem-oriented policing, hot spots policing initiatives, and focused deterrence strategies (Braga and Weisburd, 2010, 2012; Weisburd et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, despite these important reforms, it remains surprisingly difficult to get residents of poor minority neighborhoods to engage constructively with police due to a history of strained relationships, continued skepticism of the sincerity of the police, and fear of reprisals from local criminals when cooperating with the police (Skogan and Frydl, 2004). Further, highly disadvantaged neighborhoods often lack the organizational infrastructure to collaborate with the police to manage crime and disorder. The available research suggests that community policing has been unevenly implemented within police departments, with responsibility for community-based initiatives sometimes relegated to specialized units comprising a small number of officers rather than spread across police departments (Skogan and Frydl, 2004; Skogan, 2006). Many police agencies still have far to go in developing real working relationships with the minority communities they serve.

Inaccurate descriptions and poor analysis of crime problems can lead to inappropriate and ineffective police responses to recurring incidents. Goldstein (1990) urged police officers to ensure adequate depth when analyzing crime problems so that interventions could be appropriately focused, and a broader range of responses, beyond just increasing presence and making arrests, could be considered. Whereas police departments should be encouraged to

pursue strategies artfully tailored to specific risks (such as hot spots, repeat victims, high-rate offenders, or gang hostilities (Braga, 2008)), how the police choose to address these recurring problems may either improve or further damage their relationships with minority residents. Police departments can adopt crime prevention strategies that seek to engage the community in changing the underlying conditions, situations and dynamics that cause violence to recur. Alternatively, police departments can simply "put cops on dots" through directed patrols or carry out enforcement blitzes aimed at potential offenders in high-violence areas. The overly simplistic "black-on-black violence" problem description seems likely to encourage officers to pursue harsher and less thoughtful approaches, concentrating intensive enforcement efforts or zero-tolerance policies on blacks in specific public spaces.

Citizens' appraisals of the police are influenced by the style of policing in their communities. Minorities living in distressed neighborhoods routinely report high levels of dissatisfaction with, and skepticism of, the police (Bass, 2001; Websdale, 2001). Police executives and city managers sometimes point to elevated crime rates to justify officers' use of aggressive policing initiatives in poor black neighborhoods. The use of what residents may consider heavy-handed and oppressive crime-control tactics has resulted in some policing strategies being compared to "urban warfare" (Brunson and Gau, 2014). For instance, when specialized units and task forces constitute the foundation

of neighborhood policing efforts, it potentially suggests to bystanders that officers are involved in a fierce battle with every neighborhood resident, regardless of their law-abiding status (Brunson and Weitzer, 2009). The urban warfare mindset begets particular kinds of tactical operations and has the potential to create a rift between neighborhood residents and the police, reducing citizens' level of trust in officers and their willingness to participate in local crime-reduction efforts (Brunson and Gau, 2014). The vast majority of urban residents, of course, are not anti-police and fully recognize that officers are critical to public safety (Carr, Napolitano and Keating, 2007). Yet, what many minorities consider over-policing, combined with occasional disrespectful treatment at the hands of officers, intensifies black citizens' overall negative views of the police.

Over-policing refers to officers intervening in matters that, to everyday citizens, seemingly do not warrant law enforcement action. Over-policing typically occurs in locales that the police deem suspicious and/or dangerous due to obvious signs of disorder and perceptions that a considerable number of crime-prone individuals operate there (Klinger, 1997). Where the police consider certain places (and some of the people they encounter there) more menacing, they are likely to approach otherwise mundane situations with greater unease than they might in more tranquil settings (Klinger, 1997). Further, in extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods, the police disproportionately use force when attempting to control and/or

apprehend suspects (Kane, 2002; Smith, 1986; Terrill and Reisig, 2003). Officers' disparate use of force in high-crime, minority neighborhoods may unknowingly diminish their moral authority in the eyes of community residents. Poor blacks disproportionately experience over-policing, and research demonstrates that people are less likely to cooperate with officers' directives if they are not treated with respect (Tyler, 2006). Hence, aggressive policing strategies set the stage for increased acrimony between the police and disadvantaged blacks.

Brunson and Miller (2006) found that young black men reported being routinely stopped by police and "…believed that despite their best efforts, they were not able to convincingly present themselves as law-abiding, even when they were, due to the confounding influences of race and place in the creation of symbolic assailants" (p. 636). An abundant body of research reveals that officers' preconceived notions about race, place and crime can lead to patterns of behavior that leave urban black males believing they are perpetual targets for the police (for a summary, see Brunson and Gau, 2014). Fairness and impartiality are fundamental to police legitimacy (Tyler, 2006). Heavy-handed policing tactics underway in far too many black neighborhoods, coupled with some officers' predetermined view regarding criminal involvement of young black men, seriously challenge efforts to improve police legitimacy in minority neighborhoods.

Although recent scholarship has devoted considerable attention to the harmful consequences of over-policing, in economically disadvantaged, black neighborhoods residents' concerns about local crime control efforts may equally center on under-policing (see Kennedy, 1997; Smith, 1986). Specifically, urban blacks frequently express dissatisfaction regarding delayed response times, uncertain prioritization of calls for service, and the overall perception that police are not committed to solving crimes that have been reported (Brunson, 2007). Brunson and Weitzer (2009) examined disadvantaged urban males' experiences with police across three neighborhoods that varied by racial composition: one was lower class and black, the second was lower class and predominantly white, and the third was lower class and racially mixed. They noted that "perceived police under-protection or poor service in poor, minority neighborhoods has been complained about for generations, and some of [their] respondents made the same complaint" (p. 876). Poor service and a lack of empathy can certainly occur at the same time police officers are saturating neighborhoods with resources to control outbreaks of violence.

Citizens complain of under-policing when officers appear to dismiss certain calls for service or fail to make arrests in poor neighborhoods for offenses that individuals living there unequivocally believe would be severely punished in wealthier communities (Klinger, 1997). Residents of distressed, high-crime neighborhoods consistently report higher levels of dissatisfaction with the police and often blame the police for persistent crime and disorder problems (Weitzer and Tuch, 2006; Weitzer, 2010).

Residents of crime-plagued neighborhoods often call for *greater* police presence. In fact, Weitzer (2010: 121) "… found that 85 percent of Hispanics and 88 percent of African Americans favored more police surveillance of high crime areas." Much like their white counterparts, minority citizens understand the need for improved police effectiveness. However, routine eruptions of neighborhood violence often cause poor minorities to doubt that they are receiving equal protection, reducing their overall confidence in and satisfaction with police.

Conclusion

Police executives, politicians and political commentators need to refrain from using overly simplistic descriptions — such as "black-on-black" violence — when describing outbreaks of serious criminal violence in black neighborhoods. Because the police represent the most visible face of government and have primary responsibility for maintaining public safety in all neighborhoods, police executives in particular should avoid framing urban violence problems in this way. Inappropriate use of such phrases can inadvertently promote inappropriate policing activities in black neighborhoods, which in turn erode the community's trust and confidence in the police and inhibit cooperation with them. Disadvantaged neighborhoods that suffer from serious violence need and benefit from focused police attention. Black residents clearly want police in their neighborhoods. However, they want the police to know the community, treat residents with respect and dignity, prevent future outbreaks of violence rather than merely respond to incidents, and engage with them in appropriately focused rather than indiscriminate policing strategies.

Careful analysis can lead to clarity in describing urban violence patterns and can thus improve police-minority community relations in at least two important ways. First, police executives can better frame and communicate to constituents the true nature of serious violent crime problems. Second, careful analysis can lead to the development and implementation of effective and appropriately focused crime reduction strategies. The type of analysis conducted in Boston, described above, is well within the reach of most urban police departments.

Inappropriate framing of urban criminal violence problems, and the policies and practices that result, constitute substantial obstacles for police departments and for minority communities struggling to solve these critical issues. We believe the key to progress lies with careful analysis of the specific dynamics that generate patterns of violence and a broader appreciation of the value of carefully tailored police interventions.

Endnotes

1. http://dailycaller.com/2014/08/18/wsjs-jason-riley-unloads-on-obama-black-leadership-and-the-media-over-ferguson-video/#ixzz3BQiu2G00.

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tApI4YqeKck.

3. http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/chicago-violence-rahm-emanuel-calls-toug.

4. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ michael-bloomberg-stop-and-frisk-keeps-new-york-safe/2013/08/18/8d4cd8c4-06cf-11e3-9259-e2aafe5a5f84_story.html.

5. http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/commissioner-kelly-defends-stop-and-frisk-targeting-african-americans-article-1.1332840#ixzz3BPPs3Dzo.

6. http://wuwm.com/post/chief-flynn-says-policing-not-cause-high-rate-black-male-incarceration.

7. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/random (accessed May 8, 2014).

8. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, in 2012, blacks had a serious violent victimization (rape, robbery, aggravated assault) rate of 11.3 per 1,000 people ages 12 and older, whereas whites had a serious violent victimization rate of 6.8 per 1,000 people ages 12 and older (Langton, Planty and Truman, 2013).

9. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whites accounted for 58.7 percent of persons arrested for violent crimes, and blacks represented 38.5 percent of persons arrested for violent crimes in 2012. However, in 2012, blacks represented 49.4 percent of persons arrested for murder and non-negligent manslaughter while whites represented 48.2 percent of persons arrested for murder and non-negligent manslaughter (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that blacks represented only 13.1 percent of the U.S. population. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html (accessed Apr. 27, 2014).

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