RACE, SEX, AND CRIMINAL HOMICIDE OFFENDER-VICTIM RELATIONSHIPS

JOHN A. HUMPHREY
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
STUART PALMER
University of New Hampshire

To understand violence it is necessary to focus on the chain of interactions between aggressor and victim, on the sequence that begins when two people encounter each other and which ends when one harms, or even destroys, the other.

Hans Toch (1969: 6)

Violence characterizes much of social interaction. Human aggression often extends beyond psychological torment or minor physical abuse to serious assault or fatal attack. Yet our understanding of interpersonal violence and the dynamics of the relationship between offenders and their victims is disturbingly limited.

AUTHORS’ NOTE: The authors wish to thank Professors Darnell Hawkins and Robert Davis for their insightful critique of an earlier version of this article. This article is reprinted by permission of the authors in Darnell Hawkins (ed.) Homicide Among Black Americans, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1986.

JOURNAL OF BLACK STUDIES, Vol. 18 No. 1, September 1987 45-57
© 1987 Sage Publications, Inc.
Violence among blacks is particularly little understood. Recently, national attention has focused on the disproportionate involvement of blacks in homicidal death. The black homicide rate, on the average, exceeds that for whites by five to ten times (Jeff, 1981: 26). Rice (1980: 551) reports that the risk of homicide victimization "for blacks at all ages—measured in terms of the age-adjusted death rate—was more than six times that of the white population." Black males between the ages of 15 and 44 are particularly vulnerable to homicide victimization (Jeff, 1981: 26). Murder is the leading cause of death for black males 25-44; and the second leading cause of death for those 15-24 (Rice, 1980: 549). However, blacks between 20-24 are the single most likely group to become either a victim of murder or an offender (Jeff, 1981: 26). The National Center for Health Statistics reports that in 1977 the homicide victimization rate for black males 25-44 was 125.2 per 100,000 compared to 14.2 for white males in the same age range (Rice, 1980: 549). Jeff (1981: 31) considers poor black males between the ages of 18 and 35 to be an endangered species. Consider, for example, that the risk of becoming a victim of homicide is 1 in 10,000 for a white upper-class suburbanite; 1 in 5,000 for a member of the white middle class; 1 in 500 for a black middle-class individual; and 1 in 77 or less for a poor black resident of the inner city (Jeff 1981: 31). It is startling to note that in 1977 more blacks were murdered by other blacks in the United States than died in the nine years of the Vietnam War (Rice, 1980: 549).

Homicide is a decidedly intraracial crime. Block (1976: 498) observed that in Chicago over the nine year period, 1965-1973, intraracial killings varied between 86% and 90%. Similarly, Curtis (1974: 21) found that in a 17 city survey of victim-offender relationships, in only 6.5% of the cases a black killed a white; and 3.8% a white killed a black. Wolfgang (1958: 222) has reported that 94% of the 550 offender-victim relationships he studied in Philadelphia involved assailants and victims of the same race. And in Houston, Pokorny (1965) found that 87% of black homicide was intraracial compared to 91% for whites and 86% for Mexican-Americans.
While homicidal death among blacks is exceedingly high, the dynamics of this violence remains a relatively neglected area of research. Black homicide must be considered in its historical context (Kirk, 1982; Silberman, 1980). Black violence is not now nor has it ever been an inherent part of African culture; rather, it is a consequence of the long-standing experiences of racial discrimination (Silberman, 1980: 167). To Kirk (1982), the rage of the blacks is directly related to the persistence of racial oppression. This racial oppression has, in part, taken the form of the dominant society's disparagement of Afro-American culture. Blacks tend to be accepted to the extent that they reject their cultural heritage and adopt the prevailing customs and values of white America. Many blacks are unable or unwilling to accommodate themselves to such rigidly prescribed status-role behavior. Malintegration with the dominant culture, evidenced mainly by lack of economic success, often results in markedly diminished self-esteem (Davis, 1976: 89-98). Why does this rage result in violent attacks on other blacks?

Homicide typically results from the passions of the moment and the vestiges of deep-seated wrongs of the past. The experience of slavery is no more distant to poor blacks now than are the consequences of racial oppression. For poor blacks, social, economic, and political parity is available only on a sporadic basis. The barriers of racism effectively deny disadvantaged blacks the possibility of self-determination. The experience of the remnants of slavery, the sense of exploitation, and personal denigration often result in consuming frustration and outbreaks of interpersonal violence.

Coser (1956) notes that the closer the relationship, the more intense the conflict between the members. Interpersonal violence usually involves individuals who stand in a primary relationship with one another. An analysis of offender-victim relationships, therefore, uncovers the patterns of particularly important, emotionally strong relationships in a given culture (see von Hentig, 1948: 349). The more individuals rely on certain relationships for their self-worth, and social support,
the greater the potential for devastating emotional harm. It is against those persons who significantly affect an individual's self-esteem that deadly violence is typically directed.

Violent behavior can occur only within a sociocultural context. The web of social relationships and the meanings that individuals attach to those relationships must be understood before advances in theorizing about interpersonal aggression can be made.

To understand violent human behavior, it is necessary to analyze the structure of the basic dyadic relationship between victims and their offenders (von Hentig, 1948; Schafer, 1968; Toch, 1969).

Hans von Hentig's (1948) conception of the "duet frame of crime" focused attention on the importance of the offender-victim relationship. To von Hentig the victims often draw criminal activity to themselves. Schafer (1968: 79) holds that, "in a way, the victim is always the cause of a crime, even if the crime is motivated for abstract reasons. . . ." The victim to Schafer (1968: 79) "not only creates the possibility of a crime but precipitates it."

Sparks (1982: 26-33) outlines six situations in which persons increase the probability of their victimization. A brief discussion of each will be followed by its particular applicability to black homicide offender-victim relationships. Precipitation occurs when the victims are the first to use physical force against their offenders (Wolfgang, 1958) or otherwise induce the offenders to commit the crime. Facilitation refers to the failure of persons to take due precaution to prevent themselves from becoming victimized. Unnecessary risk-taking behavior or negligence with regard to the protection of property are common examples of facilitation. Vulnerability may be the result of: (1) personal attributes that make one physically unable to defend one's self; (2) sociocultural conditions—inner-city residence, being black, male, and unemployed increase the odds of victimization; (3) status-role determinants—being unmarried or incarcerated also places individuals at greater risk. Opportunity refers broadly to the
availability of attractive targets, either person or property for criminal victimization. *Attractiveness* is the estimated benefit (usually, but not always monetary) to be gained from the victimization of a given target. *Impunity* refers to the odds of avoiding apprehension after the commission of a crime. Some individuals make "safer" victims than others.

Sparks's (1982: 33) typology of victimization "proneness" is particularly useful for the analysis of black homicide offender-victim relationships. Much of black-on-black violence is *precipitated* by the actions of the victims. Wolfgang (1958) reports that victim-precipitated homicide is more common among blacks than whites. The intensity of interaction within the black community tends to preclude overly cautious behavior, thereby *facilitating* interpersonal conflict and increasing the *opportunities* for victimization.

Further, black-on-black assault typically is of less concern to law enforcement agencies. The relative *impunity* of black offenders when assaulting other blacks makes these victims far more *attractive* and, therefore, more *vulnerable* to interpersonal violence.

This research, albeit exploratory, focuses on black homicide offender-victim relationships. The structure of the relationship between assailants and victims is analyzed in terms of its demographic characteristics: race, sex, and the nature of the basic role relationships that exist between the murderer and victim.

**DATA**

Data on all homicide offenders incarcerated during 1972, 1976, and 1977, and identifying information on their victims were obtained from the North Carolina Department of Corrections.¹ Demographic data on the homicide victims were provided by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in North Carolina. North Carolina is one of the few states with a statewide medical examiner system.
Data were gathered on 985 homicide offenders and 943 homicide victims. On the homicide offenders, 605 (61.4%) were black; 350 (35.5%) were white; and 30 (3%) were American Indian. Among black offenders, the sex ratio (males to females) was 6 to 1; among white offenders, 8.7 to 1.0. The victims included 499 blacks and 414 whites. The sex ratio for black victims was 3.1 to 1.0 and for white victims, 2.32 to 1.0.

North Carolina's homicide rate historically has exceeded that for the nation. The criminal homicide rate for the United States in recent years has been about 9.0 (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, annual). Although the homicide rate in North Carolina declined 17% from 12.8 in 1972 to 10.6 in 1977, it has nonetheless remained above the national average.

Table 1 shows that overall blacks are more prone to murder friends (26%) than are whites (18.8%). Whites, however, are more given to the victimization of members of their own families (25.9%) than are blacks (20.9%). The proportion of killings that involves acquaintances and strangers varies little between the two races.

Table 1 also provides data on homicide offender-victim relationships by race and sex together. Because males constitute 87.2% of the homicide offenders, overall patterns of offender-victim relationships are expected to be typical of male assailants. Black males are less likely to victimize members of their own families (16.7%) than are white males (22.3%). But black males fatally assault their friends (23.6%) more so than do white males (18.8%). Again no differences were noted in stranger or acquaintance killings between black and white men.

While intrafamilial murder is the predominant form of homicide for both black and white females, black females are less likely to kill a family member (45.9%) than are white females (58.3%). One-third of black murderesses kill their husbands compared to about 39% of white murderesses. Black females are more than twice as likely to kill their friends (40.2%) than are white females (19.4%). However, white women (8.3%) are 3.6 times more apt to victimize a person.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relation of Offender to Victim</th>
<th>Offenders</th>
<th>All Three Years</th>
<th>Victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintances</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strangers</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>608</strong></td>
<td><strong>521</strong></td>
<td><strong>87</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
unknown to them than are black women (2.3%).

Primary relationships tend to exist between black homicide victims and their offenders. Blacks are murdered by family members slightly more so than are whites but fall victim to strangers less often. One in four black victims are killed by a family member compared to about 22% for whites. Blacks are considerably more likely to be killed by a friend (30.5%) than are whites (16.1%). However, whites (32.5%) are over three times more prone to being victimized by a stranger than are blacks (10.8%).

Similar patterns hold when considering the race and sex of the victim together. Both black males and females are more likely to be murdered by a family member, or by a friend, than are their white counterparts. However, black men are 2.7 times less vulnerable to being murdered by a stranger and black females 10 times less vulnerable than are the same-sex whites.

In North Carolina, 63.5% of criminal homicide involves both male offenders and victims, 23.8% male offenders and female victims, 10.1% offenders and male victims, and 2.6% both female offenders and victims. The data in Table 2 suggest that when either a black or white male kills another male the victim usually stands in a nonprimary relationship to the offender. Acquaintances and strangers rank as the first and second most likely targets of male-male murder, friends are third, and male family members are the least likely to die at the hands of another family member.

When a male kills a female, more pronounced disparities between the races are evident. Black males are more apt to assault fatally their female friends, while white males are more given to killing females within the family, usually wives, or women who are totally unknown to them.

Black murderesses choose men as their targets 6 to 1 over women. White women, however, kill 1.7 men for every woman victim. A primary role relationship invariably exists between a male and his female killer. When a female kills a male, nine out of ten times the victim is a family member or close friend. Black females (43.2%) are considerably more prone to murder a male
friend than are white females (18.2%). White females, however, murder their husbands and other male relatives (72.7%) more than do black females (47.3%).

Intraracial murder accounts for 87.2% of the homicide offender-victim pairs analyzed, 53.2% involved black offenders and black victims, and 34% involved white offenders and white victims. Of the interracial murders, 10.6% included black offenders and white victims, and 2.2% white offenders and black victims.

Table 3 shows that black-on-black homicide (57%) more often involves a primary relationship between the offender and victim than does white-on-white murder (47.9%). Intraracial homicide among blacks results in the death of a friend considerably more so than does white-on-white homicide. White-on-white murder, however, involves stranger killings 2.2 times more frequently than does black-on-black murder.

Interracial homicide is marked by the nonprimary relations
between offenders and victims. When blacks murder whites, 90% of the offenders and victims are strangers or merely acquainted. Seven out of ten black offenders kill whites who are totally unknown to them. Similarly when whites kill blacks, the victims and offenders are strangers or mere acquaintances.

**DISCUSSION**

Patterns of black homicide offender-victim relationships were compared to those for whites. The central findings are these: (1) both black male and female offenders tend to victimize less members of their families and more their friends than do whites; (2) black males and females are murdered more so by friends, while whites are far more likely to be killed by a stranger; (3) when either a black or white male kills another male, there tends to be a nonprimary relationship between the

---

**TABLE 3**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relation of Offender to Victim</th>
<th>All Three Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W-W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Member</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintances</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strangers</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** Data for 49 offender-victim pairs were unavailable.
offender and victim; (4) when either a black or white male kills a female, the victim is most apt to be his wife; (5) black males who kill females are more apt to murder a friend, while white males are more likely to victimize a female unknown to him; (6) black murderesses are considerably more likely to kill a male than are white murderesses; (7) black murderesses are only slightly less likely to kill a male friend than they are their husbands, while white murderesses overwhelmingly murder their husbands; (8) intraracial homicide predominates for both whites and blacks. However, black-on-black murder more often involves a primary relationship between the offender and victim. Stranger killings are more common in white-on-white homicide; and (9) interracial murder tends to involve non-primary relations between the offender and victims.

An inordinately high risk of homicidal death exists within the black community. Fatal confrontations among blacks typically result in the murder of a young black male by another young black male. This recurring pattern of black interpersonal violence seems inextricably tied to the persistent difficulty black males have in obtaining a viable masculine identity. Cazenave (1981: 176-184) refers to this struggle as the black males' "quest for manhood." It remains that American men are judged in terms of their ability to enact traditional occupational and familial roles. Above all, they are expected to provide substantially to the financial well-being of the family. Social structural restraints, however, continue to mitigate the likelihood that black underclass men will be able to meet even the minimal normative expectations of them as "men."

Masculine identity is often sought outside the home and away from the job. Cazenave (1981: 180) writes that "even before an underclass black male inherits the economic problems that have contributed to a low level of involvement for his father in family affairs, he is socialized to expect that men demonstrate their manhood in the streets, not the home."

Violence becomes a means to attain a sense of "manhood," a sense that an individual is not powerless to influence what happens to him (Cazenave, 1981: 181). Subcultures of black
men emerge to counteract their collective alienation from society at large. Ironically, attempts to assume control over their lives, to demonstrate visibly that they are “real men,” may result in spontaneous, impassioned acts of violence directed toward each other. The consequences are often fatal.

NOTES

1. Certain cases unavoidably were lost to the analysis. Those homicides that occurred during the three years studied but did not result in the conviction and incarceration of the offender are not included in the analysis.
2. The American Indian homicide cases were deleted from the present analysis.
3. There are too few cases of female-female homicide to merit discussion.

REFERENCES


John A. Humphrey is Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He is the coauthor of two books and numerous articles on interpersonal violence. His current research involves an in-depth analysis of the criminal consequences of stressful life events.

Stuart Palmer is Professor of Sociology and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of New Hampshire. He is the author of 10 books and 85 articles in the fields of deviance and social control, and much of his work has focused on analyses of the social and psychological dynamics of homicide and suicide. He is a coconvenor of two recent national conferences on stress research and its application.