

Role of Alcohol and Drug Abuse in Homicide

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Despite the growth of social scientific literature on behavior in the black community, only recently has attention turned toward the role of black men rather than to studies of the black family with a specific focus on women. There have been studies of young black males adjusting to adult life, studies of prison life, juvenile delinquency, manpower issues, and the adjustment of black Vietnam veterans, but little research on the mental health of black men. Since a population's homicide rate reflects its mental health status, this symposium on homicidal violence against black males is most timely.

One factor in black homicide that must receive greater priority in research, program planning, and treatment strategies is alcohol and drug abuse. In "Alcohol Abuse and Black America," Harper states that "alcoholism is the principal health and social problem in the black community" (1). Statistics show that death from alcoholism is three times as common among blacks as among whites. Yet knowledge of the extent of alcoholism or heavy drinking in the black community is extremely limited. Contradictions and uncertainties also prevail about what actually constitutes alcoholism, its causes, relative incidence, and the effect on the physiology of the drinker (2). Caution is needed in interpreting the data on whites and blacks. Some studies do not differentiate between heavy drinkers and social drinkers in measuring the problem and, of course, community tolerance of drinking and drinkers' levels differ across ethnic groups.

Despite little national data and methodologically weak research, most studies indicate that blacks have heavier rates of alcoholism than whites. When, however, in some local surveys, education was held constant, the incidence of alcoholism was lower in the black community than in the white.

In a study by Howard University's Mental Health Research Center of African-American men's help-seeking behavior, 16.2 percent of 142 black male adults in all income categories indicated that they had a drinking problem (3). In 1978, 200,600 blacks were arrested in the United States for public drunkenness (4). This figure is important, because people with arrest records are more likely to be arrested again and are often involved in homicidal circumstances.

Drug abuse also is a serious problem in the black community. According to some researchers, addicts represent as much as 10 percent of the total population in some innercity black communities. Data for 1978 indicate that 127,000 blacks were arrested for drug violations (4).

How do alcohol and drug abuse relate to homicide? Data show that 45.5 percent of the murder cases in this country in 1978 involved alcohol or drugs. In a study by Wolfgang and Strohm of 588 criminal homicides, 55 percent of the offenders had been drinking (5).

Harper found that alcohol was involved in more than half of the homicides in Atlanta, Cleveland, Miami, and Washington, D.C. (1). More blacks than whites were victims of alcohol-related homicide, and black men—particularly those

between the ages of 15 and 30—were more likely to be victims of alcohol-related homicides than were white men, white women, or black women.

Research has shown that the typical middle-class or upper-class killer is a white man over 30, while the typical lower-class killer is a black man under 30. Alcohol consumption is rarely a factor in middle-class and upper-class homicides, but it is a factor in more than half of the lower-class homicides. In general, the drug-using homicide victim is younger than other homicide victims; whether a drug user or not, homicide victims are more likely to be male and black. The killer of both the drug user and the nondrug user is likely to be a friend. The nondrug user victim is likely to be killed in a domestic argument; the drug user victim is often killed in arguments over drugs or while engaged in illegal pursuits. Arrest records are closely related to homicide; previous arrests for property crime increase the odds that a person will be involved in a homicide.

Researchers assume that alcoholism and drug abuse are attempts to cope with the social and economic frustration of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, and discrimination. There is a need to study racism in terms of stress; interviews with black men suggest that racism is a major stressful event for them. Holmes and Rahe's response scale for stress (6), despite its methodological problem, can be useful to clinicians—to monitor stress in the lives of their clients, their staff, and themselves—and to community leaders. A workable mental health prevention program needs objective measures of the incidence or prevalence of stress in our communities.

Unfortunately few studies deal with the economic motivation that contributes so largely to the high incidence of alcoholism and drug abuse in the black community, and consequently, to its high homicide rate. Liquor stores abound in black residential areas, even near churches, hospitals, and schools, and reap substantial economic benefits. Yet few blacks occupy high-level positions in these enterprises. Nor do blacks control the manufacture, importation, or sale of drugs. More investigations of this economic motivation as well as of the following areas are needed.

- Longitudinal studies on the decline of spiritual institutions, the family, and other support systems
- The employment of anthropological approaches involving diverse research methods instead of purely quantitative methods in studying black communities
- The treatment of racism as an important variable in substance abuse studies

Most studies on substance abuse and homicides have focused on a few large cities—New York and Detroit—rather than on medium-sized ones like Birmingham, Ala., or Nashville, Tenn. Most also have focused on low-income blacks and therefore do not reflect the cultural diversity—norms, values, and beliefs—that distinguish black subgroups from one another. Moreover, many studies have been relatively simple, descriptive, and exploratory, and based on secondary data. It might be useful to attempt a quasi-experimental design, perhaps using a catchment-area approach in conducting

research on black homicides. Why not interview the relatives of victims or some of the offenders?

There has been too much emphasis on comparisons of blacks and whites. We need to concentrate on understanding what is occurring within the black community (7).

Discussion of the presentation brought out the following points:

- More than 75 percent of homicides involve family members, friends, or neighbors as victim and perpetrator.
- Alcohol-related homicide is determined by the presence of alcohol in the blood based on coroners' autopsies. The statistics do not reveal how many of the offenders were also under the influence of alcohol.
- There is a need for rural as well as urban data on the incidence, prevalence, and other characteristics of drinking in the black community; longitudinal research involving interviews of offenders as well as collection of data on the victims; data on development of normal adults in the black community; and less focus on problem behavior and on blacks in prison.
- The importance of developing black norms for values accorded housing, income, conception of family, and the like was noted. Characteristics of these for blacks have been found to be significantly different from values for the sample of whites (7). Using white values for black characteristics, therefore, would distort the results of research.

References

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Causal Factors

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(This presentation includes material that was to have been presented by Louis Ramey of the Southern Regional Education Board, who was unable to attend.)

A basic reality is that being black in this country is clearly dangerous to your health. Black homicide is not always a rational process but, instead, it should be considered a situa-

tional process. To assume that it is a rational process is to analyze the perpetrators in terms of their individual dynamics and psychological functioning and conclude that the victimizers are themselves victims. Homicides do not always result from a rational, premeditated, deliberate process, with people acting on the basis of conscious determinants; instead homicides often involve a situational process.

What situations are responsible for impulsive homicidal behavior? Insidious and persistent racism is the underlying cause of many situational homicides involving blacks in this country.

One byproduct of racism is a tremendous sense of frustration, anger, and helplessness exacerbated by a system that perpetrates wrongs and unresponsiveness. The result is what Louis Ramey calls "free-floating anger" that is easily triggered by an inappropriate object. The real frustration arises from institutional factors that encourage economic victimization of blacks. Unable to identify the cause of his frustration, the person directs his anger toward a specific situation and specific person. Displaced aggression, therefore, is a factor in many black homicides.

The data on black homicides suggest that both the victim and the perpetrator of black-on-black homicides tend to be the people who are least successful in operating within the existing economic system.

People most likely to be the perpetrators or victims of homicide are exposed more than most other persons to cues in the environment that might trigger homicidal activity. For example, television violence is a causal factor for homicides in general, but it is especially important among low-income blacks who spend much more time watching television than other people (1). To wit, people who are frustrated by the limited avenues to success available to them in real life are likely to take the fantasy routes portrayed on television.

Other possible factors include the following:

- The prevalence of handguns in society
- The disintegration of traditional black support systems such as the family and spiritual institutions
- A weakening of moral consciousness and sense of identity
- A mental health system characterized as "psychologically inaccessible" (few black males are involved in primary care in mental health).

In sum, black homicide is a systematic expression of what racism does to human beings in a society where the reality is "us" and "them," and cultural diversity is automatically lumped under "all other." This racist motif of "us" versus "them" undergirds the data, the services, and the systemic structures in the society. Only when the environmental cues, societal pressures, and racist determinants are reduced, can homicide be reduced.

Three major points were brought out in the discussion following this paper.

1. The increasing segregation of lower class blacks should be studied as a cause of homicide. Over the past 15 to 20 years homicide has occurred most often among groups that have been racially and socioeconomically isolated.