

Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Domestic Homicide, Atlanta, 1971-72

BRANDON S. CENTERWALL, MD, MPH

Abstract: It has been assumed that, under comparable socioeconomic conditions, Blacks are more likely than Whites to commit violent acts. To test this assumption, 222 intra-racial domestic homicides (186 Black and 36 White victims) committed in Atlanta, 1971-1972, were subjected to analysis. A domestic homicide was defined as a criminal homicide committed in a residence by a relative or acquaintance of the victim. When Black and White populations were unmatched, the relative risk of intra-racial domestic homicide in Black populations was 5.8 (95 per cent C.I.: 4.3-8.0). When Black and White populations were matched for rates of

household crowding, the relative risk of intra-racial domestic homicide in Black populations was no longer significantly elevated (relative risk = 1.2; 95 per cent C.I.: 0.7-2.0). Using rates of household crowding as an index of socioeconomic status, Atlanta Blacks were no more likely to commit domestic homicide than were Whites in comparable socioeconomic circumstances. Further research is needed to determine whether household crowding *per se* is a risk factor for domestic homicide, independent of socioeconomic status. (*Am J Public Health* 1984; 74:813-815.)

Introduction

Black and White scholars alike agree that, under comparable socioeconomic conditions, Blacks are more likely than Whites to commit violent acts.¹⁻¹¹ Although it is not undisputed,^{12,13} scholars generally accept that some Blacks do not cope constructively with the burdens of racism, and that this failure to cope is manifested by higher rates of violence in Black populations than would otherwise be expected, given their socioeconomic status (SES).¹⁻¹¹ Proponents of this thesis have not presented data demonstrating that lower SES Blacks actually do commit violent acts more frequently than lower SES Whites.¹⁻¹¹ It is assumed that they do.

In 1971-72, Atlanta had the highest criminal homicide rate of any major city in the United States (49 per 100,000 residents per year).¹⁴ Black Atlanta residents had a homicide rate five times greater than that for Whites.¹⁵ I examined homicides in Atlanta to test the assumption that, after controlling for socioeconomic conditions, Black populations would exhibit higher rates of intra-racial domestic homicide than White populations.

Methods

Atlanta homicide data originally gathered by Munford and associates¹⁵ were re-analyzed for this study. The homicide data were from the Atlanta police department and the medical examiner's office. A criminal homicide was defined as any death considered such by the investigating authorities. For each case, the following information was abstracted as available: race of the victim and offender; victim's census tract of residence; offender's census tract of residence; and the relationship between the victim and offender. A homicide was classified as residential if it occurred in a residence or its immediate environment; it was classified as public if it occurred elsewhere. The victim was classified as killed by someone known to him, i.e., a relative or an acquaintance, or as killed by a stranger. An intra-racial domestic homicide was defined as a criminal homicide committed in a residence or its immediate environment by a relative of the victim or by an acquaintance of the same race.

From the Center for Health Promotion and Education, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta. Address reprint requests to Brandon S. Centerwall, MD, MPH, Department of Epidemiology, SC-36, University of Washington, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Seattle, WA 98195. This paper, submitted to the *Journal* February 17, 1983, was revised and accepted for publication February 2, 1984.

Household crowding by census tract was chosen as a measure of socioeconomic conditions; it was expressed by the percentage of households with more than one resident per room. For tracts of mixed racial composition, rates of household crowding were determined separately for Blacks and Whites.* Population and housing data for Atlanta census tracts are from the 1970 United States census.¹⁶

The populations of the tracts were aggregated into seven strata by rate of household crowding. Since the offender's tract of residence was frequently unknown, each homicide was assigned to the victim's tract of residence.**

Results

In 1971-72, 427 Atlanta residents (345 Blacks and 82 Whites) were victims of criminal homicide (Table 1). The annual homicide victimization rate among Blacks was 10.5 per 10,000 Blacks age 16 and over, five times greater than the White rate 2.1 (relative risk = 4.9; 95 per cent C.I.: 4.0-6.2).

Of the 427 victims, 274 (64 per cent) were murdered in a residence. In 236 residential homicides (86 per cent), the offender was a relative or acquaintance of the victim, i.e., it was a domestic homicide as defined. The percentage of residential homicides committed by a relative or acquaintance did not differ significantly between Black victims (86 per cent) and White victims (84 per cent). The annual rate of domestic homicides among Blacks was 6.1 per 10,000 Blacks age 16 and over, six times greater than the White rate 1.0 (relative risk = 6.1; 95 per cent C.I.: 4.5-8.3).

Of the 236 domestic homicides, 235 were intra-racial. Thus, of 427 criminal homicides in 1971-72, 235 (55 per cent) were intra-racial domestic homicides.

Of 197 Blacks murdered in a residence by a relative or Black acquaintance, 11 lived in tracts which could not be characterized for rates of household crowding among Blacks (less than 400 Black residents). Of 38 Whites murdered in a residence by a relative or White acquaintance, two lived in tracts which were not characterized for rates of household crowding among Whites (less than 400 White residents). These 13 homicides were excluded from further analysis,

*Rates of household crowding were not determined for tract populations less than 400. Two tracts were excluded from analysis because they had less than 400 residents. A third tract was excluded because it comprised the federal penitentiary.

**The tracts of residence for both victim and offender were known for 105 of the 186 Black intra-racial domestic homicides. The rates of household crowding in the victim's tract and the offender's tract were highly correlated ($r = 0.91$). Average rates of crowding in their tracts of residence were not significantly different for victims and offenders.

TABLE 1—Criminal Homicides, by Race of Victim, Location of Homicide, and Relationship of Victim and Offender, Atlanta, 1971-72

Race of Victim	Location of Homicide					
	Residential		Public		Total	
	No.	Rate*	No.	Rate*	No.	Rate*
Black	229	7.0	116	3.5	345	10.5
Relationship:						
Relative or Acquaintance	198	6.1	65	2.0	263	8.0
Stranger	16	0.5	27	0.8	43	1.3
Relationship Unknown	15	0.5	24	0.7	39	1.2
White	45	1.2	37	1.0	82	2.1
Relationship:						
Relative or Acquaintance	38	1.0	6	0.2	44	1.2
Stranger	2	0.1	19	0.5	21	0.5
Relationship Unknown	5	0.1	12	0.3	17	0.4

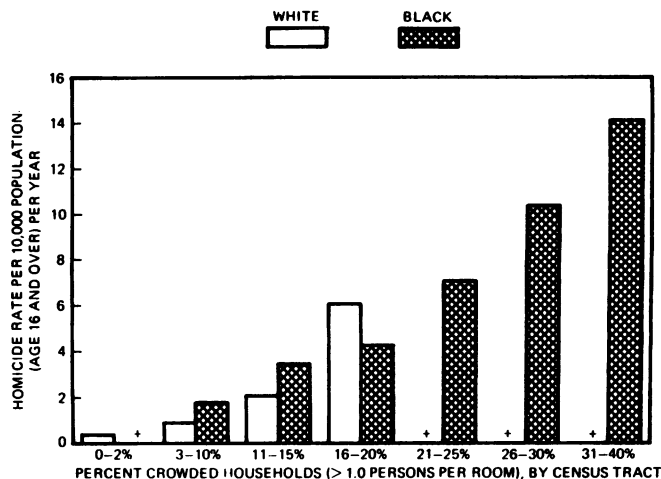
*Homicide events per 10,000 race-specific population, age 16 and over, person-years.

leaving 222 intra-racial domestic homicides—186 Black and 36 White victims. The exclusions reduced the relative risk of intra-racial domestic homicide among Blacks from 6.1 to 5.8 (95 per cent C.I.: 4.3-8.0).

These 222 domestic homicides were distributed among 115 census tracts. Seventy-six per cent of these tracts were over 90 per cent either Black or White. Rates of household crowding as defined ranged from none in a White suburban tract to 40 per cent in a Black inner-city tract. Domestic homicide rates were proportional to rates of household crowding, rising from 0.4 per 10,000 population age 16 and over in tracts with 0-2 per cent crowded households to 14.1 in tracts with 31-40 per cent crowded households—a 35-fold range (Table 2 and Figure 1).

When stratified by rates of household crowding, 30 White victims and 63 Black victims lived in census tracts with comparable rates of crowding. The remaining six White victims lived in tracts less crowded than any measured Black tract population. The remaining 123 Black victims lived in tracts more crowded than all measured White tract populations except one.

For the three strata with comparable White and Black populations, there were no significant differences between Black and White rates of domestic homicide (Table 2).



+ Insufficient Population to Permit Calculation of a Homicide Rate.

SOURCES: Population Data—1970 US Census

Homicide Data—Atlanta Police Department and Medical Examiner Offices, Fulton and DeKalb Counties, Georgia.

FIGURE 1—Intra-racial Domestic Homicide Rates, by Race of Victim and by Rates of Household Crowding in the Victim's Census Tract of Residence: Atlanta, 1971-72

Considered conjointly, for Blacks living in these strata the relative risk of domestic homicide, as compared to Whites, was 1.2 (95 per cent C.I.: 0.7-2.0). The trend in relative risks (Table 2 and Figure 1) suggests that under adverse conditions Whites may be more likely to commit domestic homicide than Blacks.

Discussion

There are two central issues in the study of violence:¹⁸ First, why individuals vary in their propensity to commit violent acts; second, why populations vary in their rates of violence. The latter issue is explored in this investigation. Nothing can be inferred from these population data regarding specific characteristics of individual offenders and victims. To do so would be an ecologic fallacy.¹⁹

All else being equal, a population's homicide rate is correlated with its socioeconomic status.^{1-11,20,21} In this

TABLE 2—Number and Rate of Domestic Homicides, by Race of Victim and by Rates of Crowding in the Victim's Census Tract of Residence, Atlanta, 1971-72

% Crowded Households*	Race of Victim						Black:White Relative Risk (95% C.I.)
	White			Black			
	Domestic Homicides	Population (≥ age 16)	Homicide Rate**	Domestic Homicides	Population (≥ age 16)	Homicide Rate**	
0-2	6	70,135	0.4	—	—	—	—
3-10	17	94,842	0.9	7	19,803	1.8	2.0 (0.8-4.7)
11-15	3	7,255	2.1	22	31,174	3.5	1.7 (0.5-5.6)
16-20	10	8,217	6.1	34	39,968	4.3	0.7 (0.3-1.4)
21-25	0	1,086	—	65	45,719	7.1	—
26-30	—	—	—	31	14,848	10.4	—
31-40	—	—	—	27	9,596	14.1	—
TOTAL	36	181,535	1.0	186	161,108	5.8	5.8 (4.3-8.0)

*>1.0 residents per room.

**Rate per 10,000 person-years.

study, rates of household crowding were positively correlated with rates of domestic homicide (Figure 1). Household crowding was chosen as the index of SES because it reflects purchasing power, i.e., the ability to purchase uncrowded housing.*** When matched for the ability to purchase uncrowded housing, the risk of intra-racial domestic homicide in Black populations was not significantly different from that in White populations (relative risk = 1.2; 95 per cent C.I.: 0.7–2.0). Further research is needed to determine whether household crowding *per se* is a risk factor for domestic homicide, independent of SES. It is biologically plausible that crowding itself may be a direct cause of domestic homicide.

There may be racial bias in reporting homicides. A fatal confrontation may be less likely labeled an accident if the suspect is Black. A homicide may be less likely considered justified, i.e., committed in self-defense, if the suspect is Black. Prejudicial labeling would bias apparent Black homicide rates upwards. Thus, the relative risk of domestic homicide in Black populations may be overstated in this study.

It was critical to the analysis that 123 Black domestic homicides be excluded because they occurred in Black populations with crowding indices too high to be matched with White populations. A comparison of "all crowded Black populations" with "all crowded White populations" would have led to a gross overstatement of the relative risk of domestic homicide in Black populations (Table 2).

Studies of other types of domestic violence have also found that Blacks do not manifest significantly different rates from Whites. In a study of child abuse in San Diego, Smith, Bohnstedt, and Grove found that Black families receiving financial aid were not significantly more likely to abuse their children than were White families receiving financial aid (relative risk = 1.8).**** In a study of fatal child abuse in Georgia, Jason and Anderock found that White families receiving financial aid were somewhat more likely to kill their children than were Black families receiving financial aid, although not significantly so (relative risk = 1.4).²⁴ In a household survey in St. Louis, Combs-Orme and Robins found that Whites were more likely to be child abusers than Blacks, although not significantly so (relative risk = 1.2).[†] In a national survey of spouse abuse, Gaquin found that Black women were not significantly more likely to be assaulted by their spouses than were White women (relative risk = 1.2).²⁵

It has been assumed that rates of violence in Black populations must be higher than in White populations of comparable status because of the psychological effects of racism.^{1–11} This assumption has not been substantiated by

empiric data with respect to child abuse, spouse abuse, or, in this study, domestic homicide. This does not mean that the strictures of racism do not exist. Rather, it is concluded that, at least in Atlanta, the psychological strength of Blacks in the face of such strictures is greater than they have been given credit for. Whether these observations hold true for other types of homicide cannot be known without further research.

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****"Purchasing power" is not to be confused with income. Due to the economic effects of segregation, Blacks pay more for goods, services, and housing than do Whites of comparable income.^{22,23} The purchasing power of Blacks is less than their income would otherwise indicate. Therefore, it is preferable to match for purchasing power rather than income.

****Smith P, Bohnstedt M, Grove K: Long-term correlates of child victimization. Paper presented at the International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect, Paris, France, September 6, 1982.

†Combs-Orme T, Robins LN: Social and psychiatric factors in child abuse and neglect. Paper presented at the 111th annual meeting of the American Public Health Association, Dallas, Texas, November 14, 1983.