Black-on-black homicide a research proposal

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BLACK-ON-BLACK HOMICIDE

A Research Proposal

Submitted by:

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will be examining the problem of homocide and its impact in and on the Black community. The purpose of this examination is to document the need for definitive research on Black-on-Black homocide which will more accurately determine the causal motives which underlie this problem.

Heretofore, research done on this problem has consisted of conclusions drawn from secondary data such as police reports or other studies, and many are permeated with racist or stereotypical notions about the character of the Black community.

Homocide is defined as the killing of another person. For purposes of this examination, we shall be considering one category of homocide, that being criminal homocide. Included in this category are murder, both first and second degree, and voluntary, non-negligent and involuntary negligent manslaughter. As stated previously, our interest is in those homocides involving a Black victim and a Black perpetrator.

We shall present information obtained in a review of the literature which pertains to the nature and scope of the problem, characteristics of Black-on-Black homocide, and the causal theories associated with it. While our literature review focuses only on homocide, in order to add
another dimension, the victim's perspective, our study sample will include victims and perpetrators of aggravated assault.

It is our opinion, one which is shared by others including law enforcement officials, that the line of demarcation between aggravated assault and homicide is very slight. A mere quirk of fate, if you will, prevented the aggravated assault from being a homicide. We therefore believe that the characteristics and causal theories associated with Black-on-Black homicide are applicable to aggravated assault.

Finally, the presentation shall include our research proposal which shall consist of the theoretical frame of reference, a statement of our hypothesis, and description of the methodology we shall employ.
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Nature and Scope of the Problem

Homocide is a very serious problem for Black people in the United States. It has far reaching implications when one considers that homocide is the second leading cause of death among Black men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, the third leading cause of death among Black men between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four, and the fifth leading cause of death among Black women between fifteen and forty-four years of age.

For a Black man between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four, the likelihood of his becoming a homocide victim is twelve times greater than that of this white counterpart. Overall, the Black (including men and women) homocide rate is ten times greater than the white homocide rate. In 1975, the homocide rate per 100,000 was 3.8 for white females, 12.2 for white males, 19.7 for Black females, and 93.9 for Black males.

The vast majority of Black homocide victims are murdered by other Blacks. This fact is supported by national and historical data. In a study of homocides occurring between 1930 and 1940 in ten counties in North Carolina, found that of 821 cases "almost 71 percent involved
Negroes against Negroes... A study of five hundred homicides which took place in Birmingham, Alabama between Jan. 1, 1937 and Dec. 26, 1944 revealed that 402 or 50.4 percent were cases of Blacks killing Blacks.

In Wolfgang's study of homicides in Philadelphia between 1948 and 1952, it can be noted that 72 percent of the 550 cases involved a Black victim and a Black perpetrator. A study of all criminal homicides in New York City during 1974 revealed that of 545 Black homicide victims, 478 were murdered by Blacks. In 1976, there were 5,628 Black homicide victims in the United States. Of that number, 5,412 or 96 percent were murdered by Blacks. Data on homicides in the city of Atlanta between 1974 and 1977 reflects the same phenomenon. (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Blacks Murdered</th>
<th>No. of Blacks Murdered by Blacks</th>
<th>Percentage of Blacks Murdered by Blacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The facts cited herein are just a few examples from the volume of data which has been gathered over the years which unequivocally supports the position that Black-on-Black homicide is a serious problem in the United States.
Characteristics of Black-on-Black Homocide

In reviewing the literature one can uncover what researchers have suggested are characteristics of Black-on-Black homocide. Three of the more noteworthy descriptions come from Wolfgang, Harlan, and Rivers.

Wolfgang, in his book *Patterns In Criminal Homocide*, reported that findings from his study of homocides occurring in Philadelphia between 1948 and 1952 suggest the following characteristics of Black homocide:

1. alcohol involved in over two-thirds of these cases
2. more likely to occur in the evening and on weekends
3. more likely to be victim-precipitated
4. jealously or altercations over money more common
5. homocides involving husband and wife more common
6. smaller proportion of these homocides took place outside the home or between strangers.

He summarized these characteristics by stating:

"the Negro homocide tends to be a sudden, unpremeditated alcohol-induced outburst between intimates in familiar surroundings..."

Harlan, in his article "Five Hundred Homocides", grouped the homocides in his study by race and sex into types according to the circumstances surrounding the homocide. Tables 2-4 list his typings of the homocides in which the victim and offender were both Black.

**TABLE 2  Black Male/Black Male**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I</td>
<td>Killing of member of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II</td>
<td>Sex triangle: Quarrel over wife or lover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III</td>
<td>Quarrel over cards, dice, money, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type IV</td>
<td>Quarrel over relatively trivial origin: an insult, curse, jostling, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 3  Black Female/Black Male

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I</td>
<td>Sex triangle: Infidelity of spouse or lover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II</td>
<td>Orgiastic drinking-sex party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III</td>
<td>Miscellaneous trivial causes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 4  Black Female/Black Female

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I</td>
<td>Sex triangle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II</td>
<td>Trivial quarrel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rivers, in his thesis "Homocide In Atlanta", discusses two classifications of homicide, expressive and instrumental. Expressive homicides are those which are generated by sudden anger and are unplanned and not linked with the commission of other violent crimes. Instrumental homicides are generated by revenge and are planned or linked to the commission of other violent crimes. He states that:

"The literature seems to suggest that expressive homicides are greatest in numbers and pose more of a problem than instrumental homicides." 11

He cites supportive data from the Wolfgang study of homicides in Philadelphia and a review of 500 homicides reported by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in 1939. He reports that a classification of the homicides in these two studies into expressive or instrumental categories indicates that in both studies approximately 80 percent were expressive. Since the vast majority of the homicides in these studies were Black-on-Black homicides, it seems reasonable to conclude that the larger percentage of the Black-on-Black homicides in these studies were expressive in nature.
Theories of Causation

Researchers and social commentators, over the years, have espoused numerous theories on the causes or motives that underlie most homicides, and particularly those causal patterns that have contributed to the high incidence of homicide within the Black community. In general terms, the basis of most of the theories can be classified as socio-cultural, socioeconomic, or sociopsychological. While some of these theories have been tested, at least to a degree, others have not advanced past the hypothetical stage. A description giving the salient points of the more popular and/or controversial theories follows.

Wolfgang, in Studies In Homocide, describes what he terms "victim-precipitated" (VP) homicides. He states:

"The term victim-precipitated is applied to those criminal homicides in which the victim is a direct, positive precipitator in the crime. The role of the victim is characterized by his having been the first in the homicide drama to use physical force directed against his subsequent slayer." 12

He cites findings from data collected in his Philadelphia study. In this study, one hundred fifty cases were designated victim-precipitated (the circumstances of each of those cases met criteria established in the definition of "victim-precipitated"). Of that number, 80 percent involved Blacks. In fact, Wolfgang states that significantly higher proportions of VP homicides are characterized by Black victims and Black offenders.

Some researchers have attempted to link geographic factors and homicidal tendencies. Boland, in her paper "Patterns of
Urban Crime", reports that "for a number of years official
statistics have indicated that murder rates are about twice
as high in the South as in other regions in the country." Clark, in his book Crime In America, makes the same point.
Pettigrew, in A Profile Of The Negro American, takes it a
step further and suggests that violent crimes among Blacks
is reflective of their background and the "violent tradition"
of the South.

"The greater proclivity to commit homicide among
Negroes, then, is partly because most Negroes are
Southerners or the children of Southerners." Another theory, articulated by Harlan, seeks to explain
the causes of homicide in terms of social class status. He begins by discrediting causal theories of a biological or
hereditary nature.

"...it is doubtful that the greater incidence of
criminal homicide among Negroes is to be attributed
to inherent, racial traits. Rather the explanation
is to found in the life circumstances of the Negro--
the community setting in which he lives and the cul-
tural tradition characteristic of his group life." Harlan then advances the proposition that "personal violence,
brawling, fighting are violations of middle class mores and
are far more characteristic of the lower class." He goes
on to say that the lower class in the Black community is a
much more predominant group than is the lower class in the
white community. From this he postulates that:

"...if murder is a cultural adhesion to lower class
status, the very class structure of the Negro society
would greatly increase it's incidence among Negroes." Finally, he offers three cultural characteristics of
Blacks which he states "have a direct bearing on the high homocidal incidence." These characteristics, exemplary of stereotypes of the Black community, are:

1. the Negro lower class is characterized by extreme instability in the sex-marriage-family complex.

2. the extremely low economic status of the lower class Negro is productive of living conditions conducive to homocide.

3. the lower class Negro is only a marginal participant in the society.  

In an article "Urban Homocide In Theory and Fact", Bullock summarizes the findings of his study and concludes that:

"The basic ecological process of urban segregation centralizes people of like kind, throws them together at common institutions, occasions their association on levels of intimacy, and thereby paves the way for conflicts out of which homocides occur."  

The colonial model is the basis for the causal theory authored by Robert Staples. The colonial model views the Black community as an underdeveloped colony which is economically and politically controlled by the dominant racial group. He states in his article "White Racism, Black Crime, and American Justice" that the "colonial character of American society tends to structure the racial pattern of crime."  
The colonial model is not new. It has been advanced and used by historians, social scientists, and writers including Fanon, Blauner, Carmichael and Hamilton, and Memmi.  

Staples explains the high Black homicide and other violent crimes rate in the context of the colonial model:
"The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has infused the victory of these values over the ways of life and thought of the colonized means that their challenge to the colonial world will be to claim that same violence as a means of breaking into the colonizer's forbidden quarters. According to Fanon, the colonized man will initially express this aggressiveness which he has internalized against his own people. This is the period when the colonizer or policeman has the right to assault the native with impunity, he attacks his peer at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast upon him. This is a pattern of avoidance that allows the colonized to negate their powerlessness, to pretend that colonialism does not exist." 22

The theories cited herein, as stated before, are more prominent ones. Only one seems to be based upon any reasonably sound research findings. Others, specifically the theories of Boland and Bullock, at best seem to be subjective assessments. In general, the body of knowledge in this area is seriously deficient.

The results of this examination of the literature currently available on Black-on-Black homicide should suggest the need for the undertaking of scholarly research to determine what indeed are the reasons Black kills Blacks. The quantity and quality of previous research on Black-on-Black homicide reflects a lack of concern for and interest in Black life. 23 The magnitude of the problem does warrant serious research to determine the root causes so that we can begin to treat the problem instead of the symptoms. Such research will hopefully uncover commonalities about Black homicide victims and perpetrators and the causes associated with the crime which will suggest intervention strategies aimed at preventing these acts. These strategies
most probably will have implications on policies and practices in fields such as education, mental health, and other social services.
Theoretical framework and Statement of Hypothesis

The theoretical framework, out of which our hypothesis is extracted, draws upon aspects of the phenomenon identified by Braithwait and Taylor which is called "materialistic depression." Let us begin with a definition of this term.

"Materialistic depression" is a dysfunctional state brought about by a materialistic society where the worth of an individual is equated with power that individual possesses, and that power is measured in terms of how much wealth the individual either has or can manipulate. It is the state of despondency which occurs when one cannot successfully compete materially with the mainstream of society. This despondency or depression leads to alcoholism, drug abuse, crime and other activities of this nature.

We would suggest that the black-on-black homicide rate is reflective of the collision between this phenomenon and the realities of life in the black community. This society measures an individual's worth by his material wealth and the power derived therefrom. However, the chance for members of the black community to acquire the possessions and power that would help define their self-worth (in society's terms) is thwarted by the nature of economic opportunities for them. The avenues
that lead to the acquiring of wealth and power are all too often blocked to members of the Black community.

The anger and frustration such an untenable position undoubtedly creates in the individual is then often ventilated through violent, aggressive acts against those who are closest to that individual.

Predicated on the assumption that "materialistic depression" is a key factor in Black-on-Black homocides, the research project which is proposed will be guided by the following research hypothesis:

--The root causes of Black-on-Black homocide has as it's precipitative basis the perpetrator's view of his self-worth being a function of material possessions.

--Any threat or perceived threat to his material possessions (i.e. money, property) or any challenge or perceived challenge to his right to have and/or ability to acquire any material possession triggers a volatile reaction that is manifested in a physically aggressive act such as assault or homocide.
Methodology

This will be an exploratory study utilizing a structured interview procedure. The instrument will consist of open- and closed-ended questions.

Police authorities have indicated that legal restrictions will prohibit us from choosing our sample through use of their records. We will, therefore, use the following procedures for developing our sample population.

1. Contacting individuals named in the aggravated assault section of the Crime Report listed daily in the Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution newspapers.
2. Advertising in local newspapers for persons who have been victims of aggravated assault or perpetrators in aggravated assaults or homicides to participate in a confidential interview for this research project.
3. Having local probation and parole officers ask the persons on their caseload who have been convicted of aggravated assault or criminal homicide if they would be interested in being interviewed for the project.

From the pool of interested participants derived from these three sources, we will select our sample. Our sample will consist of seventy-five (75) individuals in the following classifications:

1. All interviewee's will be Black.
2. Twenty-five (25) individual's must have been the victim of an aggravated assault.
3. Twenty-five (25) individual's must have been the perpetrator of an aggravated assault.
4. Fifteen (15) individuals from each of the above
groups will be victim and perpetrator in the same assault incident.

5. Twenty-five (25) individuals must have been the perpetrator of a criminal homicide.

6. Since the larger percentage of Black homocide victims and perpetrators are male, eighty (80) percent of the sample will be males. Twenty (20) percent will be female.

7. Since homocide is most serious first for Black males between 15 and 25 years of age, and second for Black males between 25 and 44 years of age, fifty (50) percent of the male sample population will be between eighteen (18) and twenty-five (25) years of age. Forty (40) percent of the male sample population will be between twenty-six (26) and forty-four (44) years of age. Ten (10) percent will be from other age groups.

8. Since homocide for Black females is most serious between the ages of 15 and 44 years, ninety (90) percent of the female sample population will be between eighteen (18) and forty-four (44) years of age. Ten (10) percent will be from other age groups.

Each person interviewed will receive monetary compensation for the time spent in the interview.

Interviewers for the project will be first and second year graduate students in the MSW program at Atlanta University. Effort will be made to select as interviewers students who have an interest in criminal justice and/or mental health. The interviewers will be trained in particular interview techniques appropriate for this sample population. Their trainer will be Dr. George Napper, Director of the Crime Analysis Section, Atlanta Bureau of Police Services. Dr. Napper has a Doctorate in Criminology from the University of California at Berkeley.
The project schedule is outlined below:

First through Third Months
1. Develop pool of potential interviewees.
2. Pre-test and finalize instrument.
3. Select and train interviewers.

Fourth through Nineth Months
1. Select sample population.
2. Conduct interviews.

Tenth through Twelfth Months
1. Analyze data.
2. Write report on research findings.
That Black-on-Black homicide is a serious problem in this country is an undeniable fact. The ramifications of allowing the rate to continue at its present high level (or increase) are frightening.

Consider what the problem of Black-on-Black homicide means in the Black community: the loss of so many young Black men to death and imprisonment; the potential effects this loss may have on the mental well-being of the Black female population; the implications this loss has for the emotional development of Black children; the debilitating effects this loss can have on the Black family.

These considerations are very real and, if the problem of Black-on-Black homicide is not substantively addressed soon, will probably give rise to an explosive situation in the Black community.

In the interest of promoting the mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being of the Black community, it becomes imperative that research be done and the causes of Black-on-Black homicide determined so that measures can be taken to reduce this problem.
FOOTNOTES


8 Data on homocide furnished by the Atlanta Bureau of Police Services.

9 Wolfgang, *Patterns In Criminal Homocide*, pp. 746-750.


16Ibid.
17Ibid.
18Ibid.
23That Black life is devalued is further evidenced in the sentencing patterns of persons convicted of committing a homicide. Research data has shown that persons (particularly Blacks) convicted of murdering a Black person are typically given shorter sentences than persons (again, particularly Blacks) convicted of killing a white person.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


