

Demographics cloud optimism on black violent crime decrease

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Optimism about studies that show a drop in the black percentage of crime may be dampened by demographic trends and statistical aberrations, according to a group of criminologists.

The rise in the U.S. Hispanic population and the sharp jump in black violent crime during the late 1980s and early 1990s may skew statistics from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and the National Crime Victimization Survey that appear to show a recent drop in black violence, said Darrell Steffensmeier, professor, sociology, and crime, law and justice, Penn State.

The researchers, who released their findings in the current issue of [Criminology](#), indicated that studies on black violent crime -- a crime that involves force or the threat of force -- often fail to account for the rise in the number of [Hispanics](#) in the U.S. Since there is no Hispanic category in the UCR and approximately 93 percent of Hispanics identify themselves, or are identified by law enforcement officers, as white, most arrests of Hispanics are added to white violent crime rates.

"The result is that the violent crime rates for whites are inflated and the black rates are deflated in these studies," said Steffensmeier, who worked with Jeffrey T. Ulmer, associate professor, and Casey T. Harris, graduate student, both in sociology and crime, law and justice, Penn State and Ben Feldmeyer, assistant professor, University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

When the researchers adjusted for the Hispanic effect, there was little overall change in the black percentage of violent crime, said Steffensmeier.

Using arrest statistics from 1980 to 2008 in California and New York, two states that include a Hispanic category, the recalculated national figures indicated that the black percentage of assault increased slightly from 42 percent to 44 percent and [homicide](#) increased from 57 percent to 65 percent. There was a small decline in robbery, from 57 percent to 54 percent.

"It is the case that violent crime rates are lower today for blacks, as they also are for other race groupings, but the black percentage of violent crime is about the same today as in 1980," Steffensmeier said.

According to Steffensmeier, studies that purport to show declines in black violent crimes may also rely on timelines that are too short to be effective. For instance, studies that start in the late 1980s and 1990s cover a period of rapid increase in black violent crime fueled by crack cocaine use in the inner cities. According to Steffensmeier, the recent decrease is more likely a return to average crime rates.

"A study that uses statistics from a short time period can lead to a regression to the mean effect," said Steffensmeier. "Which basically means, when a trend rises quickly, it can fall just as quickly."

Some researchers have suggested that the improving trend in black violent crime indicates that African-Americans are experiencing better social standing in the U.S. Steffensmeier said that black progress may not be as pronounced or as broad.

"There may be a growing affluent black middle class, but at the same time, the black underclass appears to have become even more

disenfranchised and more segregated from the rest of society," said Steffensmeier.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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