

Minorities' homicide victimization rates fall significantly compared to whites'

March 31 2016

A new study reveals that while homicide victimization rates declined for whites, blacks, and Hispanics in the United States from 1990-2010, the drop was much more precipitous for the two minority groups.

"Because criminologists have long viewed group disparities in criminal violence as important indicators of broader patterns of racial/ethnic inequality, these appear to be promising trends," said Michael T. Light, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Purdue University and the lead author of the study, which appears in the April issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

Light, and his co-author Jeffery T. Ulmer, a Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Pennsylvania State University, found that the white homicide victimization rate declined by 1.7 homicides per 100,000 whites, from 4.8 white victims per 100,000 whites in 1990 to 3.1 in 2010 (a 35 percent decrease). For blacks, they found that the homicide victimization rate declined by 13.4 homicides per 100,000 blacks, from 33.9 black victims per 100,000 blacks in 1990 to 20.5 in 2010 (a 40 percent decrease). The decline for Hispanics over this period was 5.8 fewer homicide victims per 100,000 Hispanics, from 12.4 homicide victims per 100,000 Hispanics in 1990 to 6.6 in 2010 (a 47 percent decrease). As a result of these changes, from 1990-2010, the black-white homicide victimization rate gap decreased by 40 percent, the Hispanic-white gap by 55 percent, and the black-Hispanic gap by 35 percent.

Titled, "Explaining the Gaps in White, Black, and Hispanic Violence

Since 1990: Accounting for Immigration, Incarceration, and Inequality," the researchers combined data from a variety of sources to create a single sample featuring information on 131 of the largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. from 1990-2010. The information ranged from demographics to death records.

"Despite substantial contemporary public and media attention to issues of race, crime, and justice, we knew very little about the trends in criminal violence for whites, blacks, and Hispanics in recent decades," Light said. "This was largely due to data limitations, as ethnic identifiers are not readily available in many official crime statistics. Our study is the first to show the trends in homicide victimization rates for these three groups from 1990 through 2010 in the U.S., as well as the first to show the racial and ethnic gaps in these rates."

So why have the homicide victimization rates for whites, blacks, and Hispanics converged? A major factor contributing to these trends are decreases in structural disadvantage—which includes elements such as poverty and unemployment—and segregation.

"Prior research has linked structural disadvantage and segregation to changes in homicide victimization rates, and our study confirms that," Light said. "Going beyond previous research, we provide a novel investigation into the consequences of three of the most significant social trends over the past two decades or so—mass incarceration, rapid immigration, and growing wealth inequality."

In terms of incarceration, Light said he and Ulmer discovered that increasing racial/ethnic disparities in incarceration rates were associated with significant reductions in black-white and black-Hispanic homicide victimization rate gaps.

"However, we caution against drawing the conclusion that more

imprisonment would produce more benefits because the findings need to be considered in the broader context of the effects of mass incarceration," Light said. "Given the mounting evidence of the collateral consequences of the prison boom for exacerbating racial inequality in labor market participation, health, single parent families, childhood well-being, and other outcomes, it is highly unlikely the reductions in homicide victimization rates have outweighed the devastating impact of mass incarceration on minority communities, especially the black community."

Regarding immigration, the researchers found that larger and increasing immigrant population differences were associated with declining black-white homicide victimization rate gaps. "More specifically, as the black foreign-born population increased relative to the white foreign-born population, the homicide victimization rate gap between blacks and whites decreased," Light said. "This finding is consistent with a lot of other research linking recent immigration to reductions in criminal violence. It is also worth noting that increasing differences in foreign-born populations were not associated with changes in the Hispanic-white and Hispanic-black homicide victimization rate gaps."

With respect to wealth inequality, Light said the study results indicated that while racial/ethnic disparities in affluence have expanded dramatically in recent decades, [wealth inequality](#) had either no effect on, or actually was negatively associated with homicide victimization rate gaps.

"Overall, our findings suggest that policies should focus on improving community conditions in minority areas through various means such as economic investment and housing equality, as well as spending on education, drug treatment, and work training programs," Light said. "Indeed, we found that two of the strongest predictors of the gaps in homicide victimization rates between whites and blacks, and Hispanics

and blacks were measures of structural disadvantage and racial segregation. Thus, unlike [mass incarceration](#), focusing on community investment would go a long way towards reducing racial/ethnic differences in criminal violence without worsening racial/ethnic inequality in other domains."

Provided by American Sociological Association

Citation: Minorities' homicide victimization rates fall significantly compared to whites' (2016, March 31) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-03-minorities-homicide-victimization-fall-significantly.html>

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