

Violent crime 'race gap' narrows, but persists in US

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By the end of the century, nearly 30 percent of the largest US cities had black homicide arrests rates that were more than 10 times higher than white rates. Credit: University of Maryland

The U.S. 'race gap' in the commission of violent crime has narrowed substantially, yet persists in many cities - with murder arrest rates for African Americans out-distancing those for whites - concludes a new 80-city study by the University of Maryland, Florida State University and the University of Oregon.

While the gap had been cut by more than half in the 1970s, it grew again in the '80s with the advent of crack cocaine. The researchers find the gap most pronounced in communities with higher rates of divorce, unemployment and illegal drug use.

The report appears in the current issue of the [American Sociological Review](#) (February 2010).

See Crime Gap Figures for 80 U.S. Cities: <http://www.newsdesk.umd.edu/sociss/2010/lafreest.at.cfm>

"It's somewhat discouraging to see how resilient these [racial differences](#) in [violent crime](#) rates have been," says the report's corresponding author Gary LaFree, a University of Maryland criminologist who

specializes in crime and political violence trends.

In the 1960s, the gap had grown "exceptionally high," he says. For example, the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders found low income, black Chicago neighborhoods had 35 times more serious crime than upper income, white areas of the city. The Commission warned that [racial disparities](#) and racial isolation fostered this gap.

"A lot happened in 40 years that helped diminish racial distinctions in America, including this gap in violent crimes, yet it seems safe to conclude the gap won't disappear any time soon," LaFree adds.

STUDY FINDINGS: RACIAL GAP TRENDS

Based on Uniform Crime Report arrest data from 1960 to 2000 in 80 of the largest U.S. cities (listed below), the researchers found:

- 1960-1979: The gap between black and white homicide arrests dropped 55 percent, on average.
- 1980-1999: The gap re-widened - on average more than 20 percent - with the explosive growth of the crack cocaine epidemic in major U.S. cities.
- By the end of the century, nearly 30 percent of the largest U.S. cities had black homicide arrests rates that were more than 10 times higher than white rates.

From city to city, the trends varied, sometimes significantly.

- General trend: findings are consistent with arguments that "larger cities are more tolerant with regard to racial issues."

- Sun Belt Cities: "Convergence in Sun Belt cities is probably due, in part, to Latino immigration," LaFree says, noting that it's difficult to test this. "Latino immigrants have much lower homicide rates than native born Americans."

The city-by-city data are available [online](#).

Some of the largest U.S. cities, including New York City, were excluded because they did not report federal arrest data for several years.

STUDY FINDINGS: EXPLAINING THE GAP

The researchers tested the factors that the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders asserted were fostering the race gap, including differences in family structure, economic and educational inequality, residential segregation and illicit drug use.

Relying on U.S. Census and FBI arrest data, the researchers concluded:

- Divorce, unemployment and level of drug-use in the community are the factors mostly strongly associated with the racial gap in murder arrest.
- Racial integration was not strongly associated with a reduction in the racial gap.

"Frankly, we were surprised that the gap failed to narrow the most in cities that have become more racially integrated," LaFree says. "Maybe this is just a result of the difficulty measuring integration, which is complex."

Provided by University of Maryland

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