

## **Rethinking 21<sup>st</sup> Century Urban Transformations: Race and the Ecology of Violence**

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**Abstract.** Historical policies and practices such as redlining, urban renewal, and concentrated public housing have made for mutually reinforcing linkages between race, space, inequality, and violence. What is new in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that many of these historical linkages are exacerbated by current urban transformations that affect low-income Black families to a similar extent that urban renewal did in the 1950s and 60s: including public housing demolition, gentrification of many inner-city neighborhoods, and the worst housing crises in U.S. history. As these conditions accumulate and grow more severe, so also, it appears, does the rise in urban gun violence. If the 1960s riots were, in the words of Dr. King, the language of the unheard, today's gun violence are the screams of the unheard. This white paper outlines an ecological approach to the study of urban violence that takes into full consideration the role played by historical policies and current urban transformations. Our ecological approach employs 21<sup>st</sup> century cyber infrastructure to capture the often unheard stories, misunderstood motivations, and underappreciated strains and adaptations in urban areas and to partner with urban residents in the creation of science, i.e., theory, data, and empirical scholarship.

## **Introduction**

The complexity of racial stratification in the United States has often been under-theorized in disciplines such as sociology, economics, and public policy. One aspect of racial stratification that perplexes many scholars across a range of disciplines is the difference in homicide rates between young black men and youth in other racial groups. In 2007, for example, Black males between 15 and 19 years of age had homicide rates that were ten times the rate of same-aged Whites (Williams et al. 2009). Since the national broadcast of the Chicago killing of Derrion Albert on Sept 24, 2009, 76 more children 18 years old and younger have been killed. When attempting to explain youth related violence, scholars must be compelled to query whether these rates represent a manifestation of individual-level phenomenon and/or whether something more systemic is fueling these homicides on America's urban streets? In this white paper, we argue that historical policies and practices such as redlining, urban renewal, and concentrated public housing have made for mutually reinforcing linkages between race, space, inequality, and violence. These linkages today represent, we argue, new developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: these are the grand challenge that we address in this white paper.

What is new in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that many of these historical linkages are exacerbated by current urban transformations that affect low-income Black families to a similar extent that urban renewal did so in the 1950s and 60s: including public housing demolition, gentrification of many inner-city neighborhoods, and the worst housing crises in U.S. history (Fullilove 2004). Adding to these complexities are the consequences of decisions made by top political and business officials, such as under-funded education, the prison industrial complex, a shrinking (welfare) safety net, the Great Recession of 2007, and sustained postindustrial unemployment. In fact, Black unemployment rates are so high (16.3 percent vs. 8.7 percent nationally) that reportedly the United Nations announced in April that it is investigating the U.S. for possible human rights violations (Watkins 2010). The magnitude of changing forces and their devastating consequences have led some scholars to argue that African Americans have reached a “new nadir,” a new low point in African American history in the United States (Cha-Jua 2009).

We suggest that one of the critical consequences of these sweeping changes is youth violence in inner cities.

Importantly, these dynamics are also exacerbated by the inaccurate belief in our current moment that the U.S. has moved beyond race, that ours is a “colorblind” society. This post-racial discourse works as a veil that obscures many of the most devastating structural changes for Blacks in the U.S. today. Discussing the explosive responses of Black youth in the 1960s, Dr. King spoke of the riots as “the language of the unheard.” We suggest that we must listen to today’s homicide rates for young Black men as the screams of the unheard. Listening also means appreciating the extraordinary energy that Black families must use as they marshal cultural resources, such as community networks, familial relationships, and spirituality, to cope (Bowman 2006; Goode 1960).

This white paper outlines an ecological approach to the study of urban violence, including the role played by historical policies and current urban transformations. Our ecological approach employs 21<sup>st</sup> century cyber infrastructure to capture the often unheard stories, misunderstood motivations, and underappreciated strains and adaptations in urban areas and to partner with urban residents in the creation of science, i.e., theory, data, and empirical scholarship. The implications of this new knowledge are far-reaching and include: (1) extensions of sociological theories, (2) new tools for addressing violence, (3) greater understanding of Black families’ coping mechanisms regarding violence, and (4) extensive hands-on experience with science and technology for urban Black residents.

*Challenge Questions:*

- (1) Are there significant shifts in the way that racial stratification operates in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that make African Americans in urban areas vulnerable in new ways?
- (2) What roles do historical and current social, political and economic systems play in the development of new social conditions such as the recent increases in inner-city violence?
- (3) How do African American families experience the strain of increased violence and how do they resiliently adapt to and seek to change these social conditions?

## **New Sociopolitical Low Points: Multi-level Strain and Adaptation**

The notion of a Black nadir, or low point, is not new: Rayford Logan used the term in 1954 to describe the social, political and economic disenfranchisement of Blacks in the aftermath of Reconstruction. This period included anti-Black violence, lynchings, terror, and the establishment of Jim Crow laws and customs. Although the modern Civil Rights and Black Power Movements have changed U.S. institutions and race relations significantly, African Americans from all economic classes continue to experience high levels of structural or institutional violence in the form of social, economic, and health inequalities.

For example, the current U.S. policy of public housing demolition aims to reverse the trend of racial segregation and concentrated poverty with poor schools and limited jobs. Since 2006, more than 195,000 public housing units have been demolished in the U.S. and 230,000 more units are awaiting demolition (Brown 2009). Unfortunately, large numbers of former public housing residents are not benefiting from this policy. There is a long wait for vouchers and many landlords refuse to accept them. Mixed-income housing often creates a gap in the number of affordable units demolished and the number replaced. This gap becomes wider as some mixed-income developments decrease the number of affordable units available or completely convert to market housing. Another important outcome of public housing demolitions is that sometimes gang boundaries are disrupted and a struggle for control gets played out in new communities that puts residents at risk.

Alongside public housing demolition, Black communities have also experienced reverse redlining. Instead of traditional redlining in which banks refused to invest in Black communities, reverse redlining involves subprime lenders targeting minority neighborhoods, rendering Black families the most vulnerable to the housing crisis. Fishbein and Woodall (2006) reported that Black women were 256 percent more likely than white males to receive subprime loans. In 2000, Delta Funding Corporation, a subprime mortgage lender, agreed to pay remediation of over \$7 million due to charges of racially motivated lending instead of risk-based lending. Estimates suggest that half of the national loss in wealth

associated with the current housing crisis will be suffered by families of color and range from \$164 to \$213 billion dollars. Since 2000, estimates suggest that Blacks will lose \$71 to \$92 billion from subprime loans, which may represent the largest loss of wealth for Blacks in modern times (Rivera 2008). As social scientists, it is important to build and consolidate a sociological theory of violence that considers key connections between race, space, and time.

### **An Ecological Approach to Violence**

Chasin (2004:14) defines violence as “acts, intentional or not, that result in physical harm to another person or persons.” Often neglected in the literature is the multi-level nature of violence: structural, organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (See Appendix 1). Structural violence refers to inequality in society at the macro level such that certain groups lack resources due to historical policies of multiple decision-making bodies. Organizational violence operates at a more meso level and involves the harmful decisions and actions of individuals who represent institutions such as the military, police, health care providers, corporate executives, etc. Interpersonal violence often gets the most media attention and includes fights, domestic violence, homicides, etc. Intrapersonal violence includes injuries to self that can sometime end in death. Among Black males, a 141% increase in attempted suicides was reported between 1991 (3.2%) and 2003 (7.7%) (Joe 2006).

Ecological frameworks have informed sociological studies on race and communities from W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1996 [1899]) *The Philadelphia Negro* to Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie’s (1925) in *The City* and to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s (1945) *Black Metropolis*. William J. Wilson’s (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged* represented a paradigm shift in sociology from the study of industrial urbanism to a focus on deindustrialization, joblessness, and inner-city concentrated poverty. More recently, a new approach to urban sociology takes a global perspective, examining the political economy of urban and suburban places, and values the role of culture (Gottdiener and Hutchison 2006).

We propose another significant shift in sociological studies. This shift involves using advances in GIS (geographic information systems) to move back and forth temporally and between macro and micro level ecological processes. Research in Mission Hills, CA shows how the negative effects of redlining in the 1930s continue to be evident in 1990 and 2000 census data on racial segregation and income (Tooby 2007). The goal is to show how these social forces are important for articulations of theory linking race, space, inequality, and even the violence we see in urban areas today. Innovative work in this vein includes Richard Marciano's website T-RACES (<http://salt.unc.edu/T-RACES/>), Todd Pressler's website Hypercities (<http://hypercities.com/>), and Nadia Amoroso's mapping of urban phenomena. These advances in cyber infrastructure also allow for greater community voice and participation in the development of science.

### **Community-Based Participatory Research**

To successfully theorize about violence in urban Black America, we must reconsider the clear lines between the academy and the community in the creation of science, i.e., theory, data, and empirical scholarship. We believe that the challenge questions listed earlier can only be answered with interdisciplinary knowledge and significant input from African Americans living in urban areas. These families experience the consequences of violence across time and space and in some ways are arguably themselves social theorists as they analyze the phenomenon while negotiating their lives. Families living in these communities have daily routines that involve avoiding random bullets and other acts of violence, helping their children cope with the fear of going to school, and supporting their children as they grieve for the family and friends who have died violently. Families experience anger, fear, extreme coping and, at times, sheer exhaustion.

The Black community should be actively involved in all three critical stages of the creation of science: planning, data collection, and analysis (see Clayton 1997). Community members should be present during planning meetings to identify gaps in the research design or offer insight about key components of the project. They should receive in-depth training in the advanced technology and data

collection to ensure their voices and experiences are represented accurately. Such training also ensures that the multi-level and mixed methodology remains scientifically rigorous. Lastly, research findings should be presented to the community in public forums such as PTA meetings, churches, town halls, etc. This will solidify the partnership as community members validate and critique the findings as well as comment on the usefulness of the study.

Advances in cyber infrastructure can allow tens of thousands of community members to directly upload data about their daily experiences at the center of urban transformations and violence. Community members can upload stories about violence from the micro to macro level, geographically map out areas they perceive as unsafe and/or resource rich, describe the mental and physical costs of living in unsafe neighborhoods with limited resources, and provide solutions to these issues currently underway in their community or that need to be developed. Community ideas and successful adaptations should be incorporated into theoretical models that seek to answer the challenge questions.

## **Conclusion**

As we achieve this goal of collecting multi-level data on violence in partnership with the community, we will also advance the mission of the National Science Foundation. We will create a cohort of elementary and high school students in urban communities using super computers as powerful, scientific tools to document the complexity of their lives. This interaction with computers and the sustained interaction with scientists from the academy should yield a substantial cohort (perhaps at least 1,000 youth) who have the experience and hands-on mentoring that could motivate them to undertake scientific training and careers leading to advances that could move our entire society forward like so many African American scholar scientists before them, including George Washington Carver, Benjamin Banneker, Viven Thomas, and Ben Carson.

### **Three Requested Citations**

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## Appendix 1

### Ecology of Violence

