

Race Problem or Crime Problem?

Too many poor Americans, especially blacks, live in places where law is absent.

[WSJ](#) By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., June 16, 2020 6:55 pm ET



A crime scene in Morrisville, Pa., Feb. 26, 2019, PHOTO: MATT ROURKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The public overwhelmingly supports peaceful protests against police violence, but other kinds of crowds are relevant too. Take the crowds that turn out routinely when charter-school places are up for grabs. Or the crowd so large that police were needed when a Chicago housing project invited residents to participate in a lottery that would relocate a random few to suburban communities with functional schools and job markets.

Why does this matter? What many Americans consider the intractable problem of race relations may actually have more to do with places than it does with people.

You've heard that a black American is 2.5 times as likely as a white American to be killed by police, but maybe not that a white homicide victim is 2.5 times as likely as a black homicide victim to *have been killed by police*. A black person is so much more likely to be a homicide victim generally that police killings are actually a smaller proportion of total black killings.

In the catalog of racial disparities, a black American is 50% more likely to suffer hypertension, 16% more likely to die of cancer—and nearly 500% more likely to be murdered and 600% more likely to become a murderer.

These homicide-related disparities not only are “historic and pervasive,” [write](#) Columbia University’s Brendan O’Flaherty and Rajiv Sethi in a 2010 paper, but weirdly disproportionate to every other black-white disparity associated with crime, including being poor, being a high school dropout, living in an urban neighborhood, being from a single-parent household, and even being a victim of a lesser assault.

The authors convincingly suggest: “Any satisfactory explanation must take into account the fact that murder can have a preemptive motive: people sometimes kill simply to avoid being killed” in places where law enforcement is utterly ineffective at deterring and solving murders.

This is not a completely new insight. Baltimore’s Abell Foundation long ago called for policies to “allow poor families to leave violent neighborhoods in the short run, instead of being trapped in the low-performing schools and poor quality housing that exist while their communities await larger redevelopment investments.”

Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution observed that “everyone living in such an environment is exposed to lifestyles that are not conducive to joining mainstream American society.” That is, good behavioral norms are not of much use in such places.

A widely praised 2015 book by Los Angeles crime reporter Jill Leovy cited the embattled community of Watts and argued that “where the criminal justice system fails to respond vigorously to violent injury and death, homicide becomes endemic.” In the *Economist*, a reviewer likened the result to a “parallel culture of rough justice that operates independently of the legal system, like other ‘vengeance cultures’ from Northern Ireland to South Africa.”

Starting in the 1980s, researchers identified 880 census tracts (out of 56,000) where social disorder made a law-abiding life difficult. About two million people, including many who are not black, lived in such places in 2005. In other words, except in the media and popular culture, and perhaps in the minds of police officers, these neighborhoods hardly represent the experience of 41 million African-Americans.

Their residents also overwhelmingly want out. Unfortunately, the thrust of public policy in recent decades has been to keep them in place, partly because doing so maintains some of the safest seats in American politics. Among the unhelpful gestures: elite opposition to charter schools, high

marginal tax rates on people moving from welfare to work, and housing subsidies tied to downtrodden and jobless neighborhoods. Now a noisy sliver has taken up the chant “defund the police,” as if doing so wouldn’t leave these neighborhoods even less protected while suburban communities and private enclaves double down on security spending.

Which highlights a new problem: A year ago I [quoted](#) a parade of progressive commentators worrying that, in the words of Vox’s Matthew Yglesias, “white liberals have moved so far to the left on questions of race and racism that they are now, on these issues, to the left of even the typical black voter.”

Zach Goldberg of Georgia State University, who developed much of the data, coined the ironic label “America’s white saviors” for these activists. New York magazine’s Andrew Sullivan described how political correctness in their hands had become a club that progressive elites mainly use on each other.

The charge of “systemic racism” is their obsession. Using the word rightly, however, “systemic” in America has been our attempt to protect individual rights against the amoral chaos of nature, including human nature, from which all kinds of racial and other irrational hatreds emerge. This may be a losing battle in the long run—nature will prevail, civilization won’t. But in the meantime we could help more people escape bad neighborhoods in favor of places where the law actually protects and supports their quest for a better life.

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