

# Do theories of crime or violence explain race differences in delinquency? ☆

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## Abstract

We examine race differences in delinquency using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. We use a new method that permits an examination of offense specialization. We argue that an examination of offense patterns provides an opportunity for testing theoretical explanations of race effects. If race differences in violent crime reflect race differences in serious crime, then theories of crime can explain race effects. Otherwise, theories of violence are needed to explain the phenomenon. Our results suggest that black adolescents have higher rates of violence, particularly armed violence, but they do not have higher rates of serious (or minor) property or drug crime. Race differences in violence are generally stronger for adolescents who would otherwise be at lower risk: girls and adolescents from educated and intact families. Puerto Rican adolescents also have higher rates of violence than Anglos, but other Hispanic groups do not. We conclude with a discussion of the implication of the empirical literature (including our results) for various theoretical explanations of race differences in violence.

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## 1. Introduction

Arrest data and data from victimization surveys suggest that African-Americans have higher crime rates than White Americans (e.g., Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995; Hawkins et al., 2000; see Sampson and Laub, 1994). While race differences can ultimately be attributed to racism and the historic oppression of African-Americans (e.g., Hawkins, 1995; McCord, 1997; Sampson and Wilson, 1995), the more proximate causal

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process is unclear. In fact, we argue that it is not even clear what racial patterns in offending require explanation.

In this research, we use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (hereafter AddHealth) to examine racial patterns in violence and delinquency (Udry, 1998). We attempt to determine whether blacks and whites differ in their tendency to engage in violence or in their tendency to engage in serious delinquency, violent or not. AddHealth is particularly useful for examining racial patterns because it is based on a large national sample, it over-samples African-Americans, and it uses a method that yields higher frequencies of self-reported delinquency (Harris et al., 2003). As a result, this research is more likely than past research to reveal the extent to which race effects are mediated and moderated by other demographic variables.

We use a method of theory testing that focuses on establishing the dependent variable rather than the introduction of mediating variables (although we do that as well). We argue that it is theoretically important to determine whether there are race differences in violent offenses or any type of serious offenses. If race is associated with violence but not other types of crimes, then one must look to theories of violence, not crime, for an explanation. On the other hand, if race is associated with all types of crime, or serious crime, then theories of crime and norm violation are likely to provide the explanation. Our goal, therefore, is to examine what group of theories is likely to explain race differences.

Our methods also differ from the methods used in earlier studies. First, we rely upon a statistical method that yields a true measure of specialization and that allows us to determine exactly what types of offenses vary by race (Deane et al., 2005). This method is well-suited to the analysis of criminal behavior, since most offenders commit a variety of offenses, and offenses cannot easily be rank ordered. The versatility of many offenders, however, does not preclude the possibility that predictors might be different for different types of criminal behaviors (Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Horney et al., 1995).

## 2. Discriminant prediction

Some theories attempt to explain why people engage in deviance, while others attempt to explain why they engage in aggression. The task is complicated by the fact that deviance and aggression are overlapping domains: some aggressive behavior violates norms (and is therefore deviant behavior) and some deviant behavior involves intentional harm-doing (or aggression). For example, spanking children involves violence but not deviance, the use of illegal drugs involves deviance but not aggression, and violent crime involves both deviance and aggression (see Felson et al., 1994). The pattern of offending is therefore important in determining what type of theory is most useful for explaining the behavior. If an offender engages in violence but not other deviant behavior then a theory of aggression is necessary to understand the behavior. If an offender engages in criminal behavior generally, then a theory of deviance is needed to understand the behavior.

Stinchcombe (1968) emphasizes the importance of proper conceptualization of the dependent variable in his classic work on theory construction. He uses delinquency as an example, pointing out that different kinds of action that concern the police may turn out to have different causes:

...natural variables that create administrative problems are not the same variables that have a unique set of causes. Sometimes applied researchers formulate this by saying that a natural variable 'has multiple causes.' From the scientific point of view, this means that the applied researcher is trying to explain the wrong thing. (p. 41)

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) provide the most well-known example of using offense patterns as evidence for theoretical claims (see also Felson, 2002). They argue that the tendency of offenders to engage in a variety of criminal offenses (as well as other impulsive behavior) supports their theory of self-control and argues against theories of aggression to explain violent crime. Another example is Zimring and Hawkins's (1997) analyses and discussion of evidence showing that homicide rates but not other crime are relatively high in the United States. Their work suggests that crime theories are not useful for explaining this international pattern. Finally, Felson (1996) reviews evidence showing that children exposed to media violence engage in anti-social behavior generally, not just violent behavior, casting doubt on the idea that the children are modeling the violence they observed.

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