| Douglas S. MASSEY

THE ECOLOGY OF VIOLENCE IN URBAN AMERICA

■ **RESUMEN**

En este artículo se establecen relaciones teóricas y analíticas entre la segregación social urbana y el grupo étnico africano americano, resaltando los niveles de pobreza y de violencia que vive esta población. Se demuestra cómo cualquier proceso social que concentra pobreza también concentra crimen y violencia, creando un nicho ecológico caracterizado por un alto riesgo de daño físico, muerta violenta y victimización criminal.

Se concluye con una interesante reflexión sobre las políticas de intervención, señalando que de continuar el ciclo de violencia que existe, con una política de intervención desegregacionista cada vez más remota, se perpetuarán los múltiples problemas creados por la coincidencia de la pobreza negra y la segregación.

■ **ABSTRACT**

This article establishes the theoretical and analytical relationships between urban social segregation and the African American ethnic group, highlighting the levels of poverty and violence that this population experiences. The author demonstrates how any social process that concentrates poverty, also concentrates crime and violence, creating an ecological niche characterized by high risk of physical injury, violent death and criminal victimization.

The article concludes with an interesting reflection about public policy, indicating that if the violent cycle that exists continues without a political intervention of desegregation, the multiple problems created by the coincidence of black poverty and segregation will be perpetuated.

According to a 1992 National Institute of Justice survey, African Americans are more likely to become victims of violence than at any point in the past two decades (Zucchino, 1994). Black teenagers are 11 times more likely to be shot to death and 9 times more likely to be murdered than their white counterparts. Among black males, in particular, homicide rates grew rapidly in recent decades. Whereas black men were killed at the rate of 45 per 100,000 in 1960, by 1990 the rate was 140 per 100,000, compared to a figure of only 20 per 100,000 for white males (which is still the highest rate in the industrialized world —see Zucchino, 1994). This alarming trend has prompted some observers to dub young black men "an endangered species" (Prothrow-Stith and Weissman, 1991:64).

A variety of theories have been put forth to explain the new wave of violent crime in black America. Some observers have attributed black violence to the unique set of stresses experienced by urban black communities (see Rose and McClain, 1990). Others have linked it to persistent racial inequality, which has produced frustration that is expressed as violence (Blau and Blau, 1982; Blau and Golden, 1986; Messner and Golden, 1985; Sampson, 1986). Others argue that black crime is a natural consequence of prolonged poverty, joblessness, and income deprivation (Bailey, 1984; Williams, 1984; Loftin and Parker, 1985; Sampson, 1985, 1987; Williams and Flewelling, 1988). Still others hold that it stems from a distinctive subculture that accepts and condones high levels of violence (Curtis, 1975). Herrnstein and Murray (1995) and Rushton (1995) have gone so far as to imply that black criminality stems from the lower intelligence of African Americans.

Missing from all of these explanations, however, is any serious attempt to come to terms with the most salient and far-reaching fact about black America: its high degree of residential segregation. Simply put, African Americans are unique: they are more segregated than any other racial or ethnic group in the history of United States (Massey and Denton, 1993). Blacks are segregated so highly, and on so many geographic dimensions simultaneously, that Massey and Denton (1989) coined the term "hypersegregation" to describe their situation. According to the 1990 Census, blacks in 20 metropolitan areas, containing nearly 40% of the African American population, live under conditions of hypersegregation (Denton, 1994).

This unusual degree of segregation is largely involuntary and stems from the operation of three interrelated and mutually-reinforcing forces in American society: high levels of institutionalized discrimination in the real estate and banking industries; highs levels of white prejudice against blacks as potential neighbors; and discriminatory practices embedded in public policies at a variety of levels (see Massey and Denton, 1993; Farley et al., 1994; Orfield, 1997). Racial segregation is not simply a historical legacy of past prejudice and discrimination. On the contrary, it is actively perpetuated by institutional actions, private behaviors, and public policies that continue to the present day (see Galster, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Yinger ,1995).

A growing body of research has examined the deleterious consequences of segregation for the black community, linking it to high rates of joblessness, unwed parenthood, welfare dependency, infant mortality, and poverty (see the arguments and evidence presented in Massey and Denton [1993], Galster and Killen [1994], Yinger [1995]. With a few exceptions, however, neither theorists nor researchers have sought to link racial segregation to the cycle of violent crime now overtaking inner cities. Yet in those cases where the connection between crime and segregation has been studied, the correlation has proved to be quite strong.

Logan and Messner [1987], for example, examined the strength of the connection between segregation and crime using a sample of suburbs surrounding 54 metropolitan areas. They measured the degree of segregation between blacks and whites across municipalities within suburban rings and related it to the rate of suburban crime, while statistically controlling for other factors such as poverty, population mobility, the minority percentage, age composition, and population size. They found that racial segregation was very strongly associated with rates of violent crime in both 1970 and 1980. According to their results, the more racially segregated a suburban ring was, the higher its rate of violent crime.

Although Logan and Messner (1987) found a clear, positive relationship between segregation and criminal violence, the level of

black-white segregation was not the strongest predictor in their statistical model. Other factors, such as poverty and income inequality appeared to carry more explanatory weight. The investigators, however, did not examine the effect of racial segregation on *black* crime rates —they only examined the relationship between racial segregation and *overall* rates of crime in suburban rings. Since blacks constitute a small fraction of most suburban populations, the crimes they commit would not be expected to have a large effect on overall rates, even if segregation were strongly related to the incidence of black crime.

In order to circumvent this problem, Peterson and Krivo (1993) studied the relationship between black segregation and black homicide in 125 central cities. They found that black-white segregation was by far *the most important* variable explaining variation in the black murder rate, dwarfing the effect of control factors such as income inequality, poverty, education, occupation, age composition, population size, and region.

When Peterson and Krivo (1993) broke homicide rates down into murders committed by different types of persons —family members, acquaintances, and strangers— they found that segregation was unrelated to homicide within families; it only predicted murder between acquaintances and strangers. In other words, whatever segregation was doing to influence rates of homicide in urban black communities, the causal processes operated largely outside the home and within the public sphere.

The Peterson-Krivo study provides strong *prima facie* evidence of a direct link between high levels of segregation and high rates of violent crime within urban America. Nonetheless, social scientists have paid scant attention to segregation as a possible explanatory factor in accounting for the recent wave of criminal violence in inner cities. The purpose of this article is to explain in theoretical terms the link between segregation and violent crime, and to show logically how high levels of racial segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas help to bring about a distinctive pattern of violence within urban black communities.

■ 1/ CREATING A NICHE OF VIOLENCE

High rates of crime have been structurally built into the experience of urban African Americans by virtue of their residential segregation because, during periods of economic dislocation, segregation concentrates poverty and anything associated with it. Since crime and violence are strongly correlated with income deprivation, any social process that concentrates poverty also concentrates crime and violence to create an ecological niche characterized by high a high risk of physical injury, violent death, and criminal victimization.

In a racially segregated city, any increase in black poverty is necessarily confined to a small number of geographically isolated and racially homogenous neighborhoods. During times of recession, therefore, viable and economically stable black neighborhoods are transformed into areas of intense socioeconomic deprivation, where joblessness, welfare dependency and single parenthood become the norm, and where crime and social disorder are inextricably woven into the fabric of daily life. The coincidence of rising poverty and high levels of segregation *guarantees* that blacks will be exposed to a social and economic environment that is much harsher than anything experienced by whites. Segregation *interacts* with rising black poverty to concentrate poverty geographically, and in concentrating poverty to concentrate crime, thus creating an ecological niche characterized by a high level of violence and a high risk of victimization.

The concentration of crime in urban black neighborhoods can thus ultimately be traced to two structural conditions that we know to have characterized U.S. metropolitan areas during the 1970s and 1980s: high levels of racial segregation and rising rates of black poverty. Given the correlation between poverty and crime, the concentration of crime follows axiomatically from these structural conditions: no other outcome is possible.

The ecological niche created by racial segregation and high black poverty defines the social environment to which poor African Americans must adapt. Given the barriers to black residential mobility, escape is difficult, if not impossible. How does a person adapt to a harsh environment where violence is endemic, the odds of criminal

victimization are high, and the risk of death or injury substantial? The most logical individual adaptation is to become violent oneself. By adopting a threatening demeanor, cultivating a reputation for the use force, and by selectively backing up that reputation with actual violence, one can deter potential criminals and increase the odds of survival.

In a social world characterized by endemic, exogenously-induced violence, therefore, violent behavior and an obsessive concern with respect become rational strategies for survival. Given a geographic concentration of violence, some people within the community are sure to adopt violent attitudes and behavior as survival strategies. As more people adopt more violent strategies for self-preservation, the average level of violence within the niche rises, leading others to adopt more violent behavior. As the average level of violence rises over time, more people adopt increasingly violent strategies to protect themselves from the growing threat of victimization, ultimately producing a self-perpetuating upward spiral of crime and violence.

Although a cycle of black violence may follow axiomatically from racial segregation and black poverty, what has made the spiral so frightening and appalling in recent years is the concomitant availability of lethal weapons of spectacular firepower. Precisely at the moment when forces in U.S. society were interacting to maximize the conditions for violence in one segment of the population, guns became cheaper, more deadly, and less controlled than ever. The existence of a racially-distinctive ecological niche of violence within a society that has chosen to permit unparalleled access to automatic weapons can only produce one outcome: the spectacle of black men killing each other in increasingly violent ways.

Thus racial segregation is deeply implicated in the tide of violence that swept urban America during the 1980s and 1990s. The transformation of the urban economy from manufacturing to services, the suburbanization of employment, the decline in the real value of welfare, and the stagnation of wages combined over the past two decades to raise the rate of black poverty; but high levels of segregation confined this increased poverty to a small number of racially isolated neighborhoods clustered around the urban core. As a result, the concentration of poverty was dramatically increased within segregated black communities to create an ecological niche in which crime was prevalent and violence a logical adaptation to the harsh conditions of daily life.

■ 2/ ADAPTING TO THE NICHE OF VIOLENCE

The foregoing paragraphs provides a theoretical explanation for the rising tide of black violence that is generally consistent with the observed facts. It explains the strong association between racial segregation and crime rates observed by Logan and Messner (1987); it explains why Peterson and Krivo (1993) found that segregation was associated with killings between strangers and acquaintances but not relatives; it explains why crime rates continue to rise in the black community even though they are falling for other groups (Zucchino, 1994); and it explains why repressive police measures have done little to stem the tide of black violence, since they do not address the fundamental causes of black crime.

Even though the theory of segregation explicitly links high rates of black crime to structural arrangements in society, however, ultimately it is a theory of micro-behavior: it makes specific predictions about how people adapt to conditions of life that have been imposed on them by virtue of being confined to an ecological niche characterized by extreme levels of violence that cannot be avoided. Building a *prima facia* case for a connection between segregation and crime, therefore, requires information about how people negotiate the difficult conditions of life in poor, inner-city neighborhoods.

Anderson (1994, 1999) has carried out precisely this sort of analysis. His ethnographic research draws upon years of participant observation within one poor black neighborhood of Philadelphia, a city that manifestly exhibits the structural pre-determinants of concentrated poverty and violence. Not only is Philadelphia characterized by a very high rate of black poverty (according to the 1990 Census it stood at 39%, compared to just 8% for whites); it is also one of the metropolitan areas Massey and Denton (1989) described as hypersegregated, owing to the extreme segregation of blacks on

multiple geographic dimensions, a condition that Denton (1994) reconfirmed for 1990.

As a result of these two features of Philadelphia's social structure —high segregation and high rates of black poverty— Massey and Eggers (1990) found a remarkably high concentration of black poverty. According to their calculations, the average poor black family lived in a neighborhood that was 30% poor in 1980, whereas the average poor white family lived in a neighborhood that was only 10% poor. An average value of 30% means that many poor black families experience substantially higher rates of neighborhood poverty, in some cases living in neighborhoods where more than 50% of the families are below the poverty line. Poor whites almost never live in such neighborhoods (Massey *et al.,* 1992).

The specific neighborhood studied by Anderson (1994) typifies the ecological niche of violence that follows from Philadelphia's structural conditions: it is a place of "muggings, burglaries, carjackings, and drug-related shootings, all of which may leave their victims or innocent bystanders dead" (p. 82). According to Anderson, this social environment reflects the disproportionate concentration of "street families" within it. People from such families "show a lack of consideration for other people and have a rather superficial sense of family and community" (p. 83). Their lives are "marked by disorganization. In the most desperate circumstances [they] frequently have a limited understanding of priorities and consequences, and so frustrations mount over bills, food, and, at times, drink, cigarettes, and drugs. Some tend toward self-destructive behavior..." (p. 83).

Anderson links this destructive behavior to persistent poverty: "the seeming intractability of their situation, caused in large part by the lack of well-paying jobs and the persistence of racial discrimination, has engendered deep-seated bitterness and anger in many of the most desperate and poorest blacks... [T]he frustrations of persistent poverty shorten the fuse in such people —contributing to a lack of patience with anyone, child or adult, who irritates them" (p. 83). In other words, the proclivity toward violence is produced by long-term poverty, and by concentrating the persistently poor in certain neighborhoods,

segregation has concentrated a "street orientation" to create a social world characterized by high levels of interpersonal hostility and aggression.

Low-income black neighborhoods also contain what Anderson (1994) calls "decent families", who "tend to accept mainstream values more fully and attempt to instill them in their children... They value hard work and self-reliance and are willing to sacrifice for their children... Extremely aware of the problematic and often dangerous environment in which they reside, decent parents tend to be strict in their child-rearing practices, encouraging children to respect authority and walk a straight moral line" (pp. 82-83).

Even if children come from decent families, however, they must adapt to a social world that is disproportionately influenced by the culture, values, and behavior of the street. According to Anderson (1994), "simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior... Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values... must be able to handle themselves in a street-oriented environment" (pp. 81-82).

Thus, the fundamental need to adapt to conditions of endemic violence that are structurally imposed and inescapable has led to the evolution within poor, inner-city black neighborhoods of a "code of the streets" that encourages and promotes the use of force, even among "decent" families. According to Anderson (1994:82), this code

amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence. The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and enforced mainly by the street-oriented, but *on the streets the distinction between street and decent is often irrelevant,* everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive; it is literally necessary for operating in public. Therefore, even though families with a decency orientation are usually opposed to the values of the code, they often reluctantly encourage their children's

41

familiarity with it to enable them to negotiate the inner-city environment (emphasis added).

This passage provides, in essence, a succinct description of the self-perpetuation of violence through rational, micro-level decisions taken by families and individuals who are forced to confront a hostile social environment. Asking residents of poor, racially isolated neighborhoods to "choose" a less violent path or to say "no" to the temptation of the streets is absurd, given the threatening character of the niche in which they live. To survive on the streets of segregated, inner city America, one must learn, and to a significant extent, internalize, the code of violence. In this way, violent behavior is passed from person to person and parents to children in a self-feeding, escalating fashion, precisely in the manner predicted by the theory of residential segregation.

A primary concern of those invested in the code of the streets is the maintenance of "respect", which is "loosely defined as being treated 'right', or granted the deference one deserves" (p. 82). Within a hostile and violent social world, the maintenance of respect is much more than a vain concern with appearances; it a critical social resource that promotes physical security and survival, since "with the right about of respect [a person] can avoid 'being bothered' in public" (p. 82).

In essence, what the code of the streets provides is a framework for negotiating respect. In a niche of violence, respect can only be built and maintained through the strategic use of force. Beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood, young people are socialized to fight in order to earn respect. In doing so, they lower their odds of victimization and forestall an even larger number of fights in the future. "The violent resolution of disputes, the hitting and cursing, gains social reinforcement. The child in effect is initiated into a system that is really a way of campaigning for respect... Many parents actually impose sanctions if a child is not sufficiently aggressive" (p. 87).

Within an ecological niche characterized by high rates of crime and violence, therefore, respect is a scarce but important social resources that actors attempt to cultivate in order to lower the risk of criminal victimization. The cultivation of respect through the strategic use of violence represents a logical, instrumental strategy pursued by rational individuals as a means of adapting to the harsh conditions of daily life created by structural arrangements in American society that are beyond individual control.

The inhabitants of poor, inner-city neighborhoods not only pursue individual strategies to reduce their risk of victimization, however; they also act collectively. Perhaps the most common collective response to the niche of violence is the formation of gangs, whose role and function in low income neighborhoods have been studied in detail by Sánchez Jankowski (1991). In essence, gangs collectivize the code of the streets, which he calls "defiant individualism", through an explicit organizational structure that controls and regulates the use of force.

According to Sánchez Jankowski (1991:45), individuals join gangs for a variety of reasons, but one central motivation is self-protection: "Individuals also join gangs because they believe the gang can provide them with personal protection from the predatory elements active in low income neighborhoods". People, quite rationally, "are either tired of being on the alert or want to reduce the probability of danger to a level that allows them to devote more time to their effort to secure more money".

Joining a gang thus provides a way of substantially increasing one's "respect" while minimizing personal effort and risk. Membership in a gang provides a deterrent against attacks and victimization, since an attack on one gang member constitutes an attack on the group and can trigger a violent response not simply from the victim, but from all members of the gang. Thus, whereas "respect" is a form of human capital that individuals must laboriously cultivate through their actions and behavior, gang membership is a form of social capital that may be accessed simply by joining up.

Gangs also provide benefits to the neighborhood as a whole. Although gangs do not eliminate violence, they at least control and regulate it, and generally deflect it away from territories and groups they cover.

Residents of the neighborhoods studied by Sánchez Jankowski "emphasized that gangs are more able to deter crime in their community than the police because gang members are distributed throughout the community and are able to identify strangers... [T]hey are not restrained from taking immediate action against anyone considered a community threat... [and] unlike the police, the gang can administer physical injury without regard to laws designed to restrain such action" (p. 184).

Gangs also provide special protection for the weakest members of the community: children and the elderly. According to Sánchez Jankowski, "in 84 percent (31) of the cases that I studied, gangs provided at least escort service for anyone in the community who asked for it" (p. 185). "In addition to trying to assume responsibility for protecting residents from being accosted and/or robbed, all but three of the gangs that I studied also tried to protect them from other social predators, like loan sharks, unethical landlords, and/or store owners who overcharged for their products" (pp. 185-186).

Despite these benefits to individuals and communities, gangs carry costs since they inevitably become engines of violence themselves. In order to ensure their own survival as organizations, gangs must acquire capital, which moves them into illegal activities, notably the marketing and distribution of narcotics and other illegal drugs. The resulting proliferation of addicts promotes crime indirectly, since unemployed junkies must acquire cash to support their habits, thereby inflating rates of robbery and burglary. In addition, the survival of a gangs requires the frequent use force against rival gangs who seek to enter their market areas or zones of social influence. They must also apply force whenever the well-being or reputation of a member is threatened. Rather than a spiral of individual-level violence, therefore, gangs more often produce a spiral of collective violence between competing organizations.

Thus, two detailed ethnographic studies of poor, inner-city areas yield descriptions of individual and collective behavior that are consistent with the line of theoretical reasoning developed here. The ecological niche of violence promotes and perpetuates high levels of violence

among blacks in two ways: by encouraging the formation of criminal gangs at the collective level and by fostering an obsessive concern for respect at the individual level. The wave of crime in urban black America is not simply a product of individual moral failings; it is an inevitable outgrowth of social conditions created by the coincidence of racial segregation and high rates of black poverty.

■ 3/ CONCLUSION

I have developed a line of theoretical reasoning that connects the rising tide of crime in inner city black neighborhoods to basic structural features of American society, as opposed to the individual failings of African Americans. I argue that two features of U.S. metropolitan social structure —high rates of black poverty and high levels of black segregation— interact to produce an ecological niche within which poverty is concentrated and crime is prevalent. African Americans, who are largely forced to inhabit this structurally-produced niche, must adapt to a violent social world where the chance of criminal victimization is great.

According to ethnographic data from high-crime areas, adaptive responses to this environment have occurred at both the individual and collective level. At the individual level, rational actors attempt to build and cultivate "respect" through the strategic and frequent use of violence. A willingness to use violence provides a deterrent against predators inhabiting the niche and thereby lowers the odds of victimization. As such it constitutes a valuable form of human capital in the ghetto. As more people adopt more violent strategies of survival, however, the average level of violence rises, causing even more people to adopt even high levels of violence, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of violence.

At the collective level, people turn to gangs to protect themselves from the ongoing threat of violence. Membership in a gang gives an actor access to the deterrence of violence without having to build and cultivate an individual reputation for violence. A person simply taps into the "respect" accorded the gang though its reputation for the use of violence and mutual defense. Gang membership provides a valuable form of social capital that can significantly lower the odds of

victimization within the niche of violence. Once again, however, gangs create new opportunities and motivations for the expression of violence, and in the long run produces better-organized violence on a larger scale, even as they protect the interests of certain individuals.

Thus, the present cycle of urban violence does not stem from individual failings, but from basic structural features of urban society that create a niche of violence to which black Americans must adapt. Sadly, in promoting high levels of violence among blacks, segregation simultaneously gives whites a strong incentive to maintain the status quo and to perpetuate the ghetto as a basic feature of American life. As a result, segregation has grown more intense in recent years as it has moved beyond the neighborhood level to occur increasingly at the municipal level. At present, blacks and whites are not just socially isolated; they are fiscally isolated as well. Through municipal-level segregation, blacks are forced to bear a larger share of the costs of their own victimization, while whites escape the high costs of black poverty, at least in the short term.

Elsewhere I and others have outlined the federal policy initiatives that would need to be undertaken to end the legacy of American Apartheid (see Massey and Denton, 1993; Yinger, 1995). Despite the fact that most of these policies were implemented by the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Henry Cisneros, during the first two years of the Clinton administration, it is hard to be optimistic about the future welfare of either cities or black America, given the understanding of the origins and nature of black crime developed above.

In the current political climate, which emphasizes a reduced role for government, limited discretionary spending at the federal level, and a profound reluctance to embrace race-specific remedies, the chances of a major new desegregation initiative seem remote indeed. Yet unless forceful action is undertaken soon to desegregate urban America, the cycle of black, urban violence can be expected to continue. As the cycle of violence continues, political support for a policy of desegregation will wither and become even more remote, leading to the perpetuation of the multiple problems created by the coincidence of segregation and black poverty.

At present, the United States appears to be locked into a set of institutional arrangements that will only exacerbate racial inequalities, perpetuate urban violence, deepen the socioeconomic problems of African Americans, and erode the status and well-being of American cities. As central cities in general, and urban black communities in particular, continue to deteriorate fiscally, socially, and economically, the socioeconomic health of the nation will also erode, for despite the efforts of white Americans to escape through segregation, inevitably they will end up paying the costs —directly in the form of higher expenses for insurance, health care, criminal justice, security, and education, and indirectly in the form of reduced competitiveness on world markets, a diminished quality of life, and a retreat from American democratic ideals.

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