Cite this article as:
D F Hawkins
Inequality, culture, and interpersonal violence
*Health Affairs* 12, no.4 (1993):80-95
doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.12.4.80

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is available at:
http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/12/4/80

**For Reprints, Links & Permissions**: http://content.healthaffairs.org/1340_reprints.php

**Email Alertings**: http://content.healthaffairs.org/subscriptions/etoc.dtl

Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution
To Subscribe: https://fulfillment.healthaffairs.org
INEQUALITY, CULTURE, AND INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

by Darnell F. Hawkins

Prologue: Within a society that is arguably one of the most violent in the world, rates of violence are even higher among some socioeconomic and ethnic groups in the United States. Studies have sought to establish links between culture, race, inequality, and violence, beginning with early immigrant populations to this country and focusing more recently on violence among urban populations of varied ethnic origin. While this may be relatively new ground for public health researchers, social scientists have been wrestling with various theories for decades. In this paper Darnell Hawkins examines the relevance of these theories for the current effort to shape public policy on violence. He argues that “neither extant notions of cultural difference nor socioeconomic inequality offer fully satisfactory explanations for the group differences in rates of violence observed in modern America.” His observation is that “cultural differences, as opposed to poverty and socioeconomic inequality, appear to be the choice of many current social analysts [and] . . . nonscholarly commentators and observers, including the media and many public officials.” By way of explanation, Hawkins notes that “there appears to be a preference for social policies that minimize the need for structural change or major governmental initiatives as a means of solving America’s social problems.” He suggests that strategies be implemented that take into account the effects of social inequality. Hawkins is on the faculty of the departments of African American studies and sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He received a doctorate in sociology from the University of Michigan and a law degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He served as a visiting scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Division of Injury Control during the spring of 1992 and is the editor of Ethnicity, Race, and Crime: Perspectives across Time and Place (University of New York Press, forthcoming).
Abstract: Policymakers often are at odds over what strategies will be most effective at reducing the incidence of violent behavior in high-risk populations. Beginning with the position that social theory and public policy are inextricably linked, the author examines the policy implications of the long-standing debate in the social sciences over the relative contributions of socioeconomic inequality versus cultural differences as causes of violence. While the weight of the scholarly evidence favors neither of these explanations, existing and proposed policies often reflect a preference for the importance of culture. This paper discusses the limitations of that choice and advocates alternative policies that consider the importance of both sets of etiological factors.

One of the widely noted developments of the past decade is the trend toward viewing interpersonal aggression and violence as a public health concern rather than as a matter to be handled exclusively by the criminal justice system. Among the heralded consequences of this shift in labeling and “jurisdiction” has been the perception that traditional public health modes of intervention and prevention can reduce the incidence of intentional injury. Advocates of a public health approach cite health practitioners’ past success in eradicating many infectious diseases and reducing the injury that results from various forms of unintentional trauma, such as motor vehicle crashes.1

Through their surveillance of rates and trends of violence and the identification of high-risk groups, public health researchers have contributed to a tradition begun by analysts trained in the social, behavioral, and criminological sciences. Indeed, what are now considered to be epidemiological studies of homicide, suicide, and assault have been conducted by criminologists and sociologists for many decades. However, the move toward the attempted prevention of violence and intentional injury initiated by public health has prompted a series of questions, some of which have not been explored sufficiently by academic social scientists. What are the causes of group differences in the level of involvement in violence? How important is an understanding of the etiology of violence for the devising of effective prevention and intervention policies and strategies? How does one’s choice of explanation and theory affect the kinds of policies that are selected and implemented?

A major argument presented in this paper is that the design of public policies that can plausibly be expected to reduce rates of interpersonal violence in the United States requires a firm grounding in the study of the social determinants of aggression. To that end, I review and critique research and theory related to the etiology of violence that have emerged from the social science literature. This research has not always been fully presented and debated in public health-oriented discussions, but it has obvious significance for the intervention and prevention efforts that are part of the public health tradition. My review is not intended to provide an in-depth analysis and critique of this rather extensive literature. Instead, I
attempt to identify major themes and findings and examine their relevance for the shaping of public policy to reduce violence. My review is limited to research and theory aimed at explaining ethnic, racial, and class differences in rates of involvement in interpersonal violence.

Differences In Rates Of Interpersonal Violence

Past criminological and epidemiological studies have shown that levels of interpersonal violence, especially lethal aggression, vary considerably across social groups in the United States. Comparatively high rates of violence have been reported over the years among members of certain ethnic and racial groups, urban dwellers, and persons who reside in specific regions of the country. African Americans, some populations of Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans are among the contemporary racial/ethnic groupings that have comparatively high rates of assaultive violence and homicide. Rates also tend to be high among whites and nonwhites who reside in the South and the West. Recent studies show that the large urban centers of the United States continue to experience high rates of violence, concentrated largely among young black males.

Given such differential levels of risk across social groups and the emphasis on intervention, public health researchers have entered a debate that has been integral to the traditional social scientific study of violence. That discourse centers on the question of what theory(ies) of violence causation best accounts for the group differences observed. What characteristics are common to those ecological and demographic groupings that display relatively high rates of interpersonal violence? How are these groups different from those that display lower rates of violence? What societal forces have produced such differences? What is the role of social-class stratification in producing ethnic and racial differences in rates of violence?

In addition to their purely scholarly relevance, these queries have profound implications for current efforts to devise and implement violence-reduction policies. The efficiency and effectiveness of such interventions obviously depend on the rallying of the public will and financial considerations. I suggest that they also depend on the availability, quality, and soundness of the theory and research behind the policies. Such intervention efforts generally target groups shown to be at highest risk for involvement in violence, and their success is dependent on an understanding of the factors that contribute to elevated risk levels. This understanding is derived from well-grounded theory and theory-informed research.

Mark Rosenberg and James Mercy have described four major sociological paradigms or families of theory that posit causes of homicide and other forms of assaultive violence: cultural (or subcultural), structural, interac-
tionist, and economic. Sue Titus Reid, a criminologist, groups three of these four together (cultural, structural, and economic) and labels them “social-structural theories.” Other observers have suggested that major theories designed to explain violence and other forms of antisocial conduct tend to fall into two distinct groupings. One group of theories tends to stress the causal importance of structural and/or economic conditions (structural approach). The other tends to focus on interpersonal interactions and/or the values and norms of individuals and groups (interactionist and normative approaches). While some researchers have argued for a consideration of multiple causes, clear theoretical preferences or choices are evident in the work of most analysts of interpersonal violence.

Views Of Ethnicity, Race, And Violence

In the United States the social scientific efforts to provide “causes” for antisocial conduct, including violence, were first found in studies of white ethnic groups rather than nonwhite groups. High rates of crime and violence were said to be evident among the waves of immigrants from Europe to America from the mid-1800s to World War I. Although statistics for the past are not always reliable or easily obtainable, some data suggest that the Irish, Italians, Greeks, Jews, and other groups of recently arrived white ethnics during this period had considerably higher rates of homicide, assault, and other forms of violence than is found among them today.

These and other “new” immigrant groups of the period, especially second and third generations among them, had higher rates of crime and violence than the more privileged and settled ethnic groups that preceded them. Roger Lane found that certain white ethnic groups in nineteenth-century Philadelphia had rates of interpersonal violence that closely resembled those of blacks living in the city. During this same period, Ted Gurr reported that injury and death due to interpersonal violence posed a significant risk among many of the nation’s immigrants as well as among its less advantaged native population. Such observations have prompted the development of theories designed to account for these ethnic differences and their seeming disappearance over time.

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay’s investigations of Chicago and other urban areas showed that crime and violence were more likely to be found in what is often referred to today as the “inner city.” High rates of such conduct were shown to exist in these areas despite changes in their ethnic/racial composition. The inner city or “zone of transition” showed high rates of antisocial behavior among European ethnics as well as among the African Americans who gradually displaced them. The researchers used the term social disorganization to label the criminogenic conditions thought to
exist in these transitional neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{12}

While the last half-century has witnessed a major reduction in the rate of lethal interpersonal violence among many white ethnic groups in the United States (white southerners possibly excepted), rates for African Americans generally have remained unchanged.\textsuperscript{13} The rate of homicide among blacks was nearly six times the rate among whites in the 1910s and has remained at about that rate for most of this century. Native Americans and persons of Mexican and Puerto Rican ancestry also have had comparatively high rates of serious violence during the past several decades.\textsuperscript{14} Ronald Flowers reports that the Hispanic homicide rate was more than three and one-half times the white rate in 1985.\textsuperscript{15}

Why has the incidence of homicide among blacks failed to decline at a rate comparable to that observed for whites over the twentieth century? What social forces account for the high rates of homicide found among African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans today? To a greater extent than is true of any other racial or ethnic group, interpersonal violence among African Americans recently has caught the attention of the mass media.\textsuperscript{16} Increased media coverage has resulted in part from the announcement during the late 1970s by federal public health officials of plans to reduce the rate of homicide among young black males. Consistent with these plans, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has documented ethnic and racial differences in the risk of homicide victimization in the United States during the past decade.\textsuperscript{17}

Somewhat surprisingly, a rather limited range of explanations has been offered by social analysts for white/nonwhite differences in the rate of homicide. Among contemporary researchers, this omission may partly reflect the political volatility of discussions of ethnic and racial difference.\textsuperscript{18} In a pioneering discussion of racial differences, Horace Brearley observed that during the early years of the twentieth century, explanations for the high rate of homicide among blacks ranged from the credible to those based on prejudice and hasty generalizations.\textsuperscript{19} Like those explanations for overall black criminality during this period and earlier, many theories reflected views of racial difference espoused by Social Darwinists or other advocates of the innate inferiority of nonwhites.\textsuperscript{20}

In opposition to such biological determinist views has come a long line of research aimed at describing the social causes of individual and group crime-rate differences. Many of the theories potentially relevant for an understanding of the causes of homicide are intended to apply not just to violent behavior but to all types of criminal and antisocial behavior. Others are aimed specifically at explaining the incidence of violence.\textsuperscript{21}

During the late twentieth century, most of these theories have been applied primarily toward the attempted explanation of the comparatively
high rates of crime and violence found among blacks and Latinos in the United States. The high rates of interpersonal violence among these minorities are contrasted with the relatively low rates among contemporary white ethnic populations. But, given what we know about the incidence of crime and violence among these latter groups during the past, it would seem that an understanding of their experiences might provide insights into the causes and reduction of violence among blacks and Latinos today.

However, instead of providing valuable insights, white ethnic versus minority crime-and-violence comparisons often mirror the politics of American race relations. Stephen Steinberg has suggested that during the late twentieth century, the struggles of white ethnic groups against economic deprivation have been greatly romanticized. He further notes that contemporary views of the past are conducive to an ahistorical view that attributes perceived white economic success to individual effort and perceived nonwhite failure to cultural dysfunctions. This is reflected in a tendency to ignore the miserable social conditions under which the “new” European immigrants to the United States were forced to live and the crime and violence often found among them. He proposed that crime among blacks and Hispanics is most often treated by social scientists “as a cultural aberration rather than a symptom of class inequality.”

In many instances this ethnic analogy has led to the offering of culture-based explanations for current racial/ethnic differences in rates of involvement in interpersonal violence in the United States.

Culture And Subculture

Consistent with Steinberg’s observations, others also have noted an emphasis on the effects of cultural or subcultural differences in extant attempts to explain the high rate of homicide among African Americans. Culture-based concepts ranging from a “culture of poverty” to a “subculture of violence” have emerged as the most widely accepted explanations for the existence of ethnic and racial differences in the level of lethal and nonlethal aggression. Although advocates of these culture-oriented explanations acknowledge the existence of socioeconomic inequality, their “locus of causation” when explaining ethnic, racial, and social-class differences in rates of violence is the values, attitudes, and beliefs that are said to distinguish low-violence from high-violence groups.

The idea that certain ethnic, racial, or class groups (or subpopulations within them) have high or low rates of violence because of their cultural values also has become an “umbrella” concept that unites or integrates many seemingly competing theories of crime and violence. For example, when put to the task of explaining group differences in rates of inter-
personal violence, various theories that emphasize social learning, social control/containment, or psychosocial or psychiatric dysfunction are all strengthened to the extent that they affirm the existence of cultural or subcultural differences. The disproportionate resort to violence is deemed to be quite understandable for dysfunctional persons who reside not only within dysfunctional families and other primary groups, but also within dysfunctional or aberrant cultural contexts.

Since the study of society is in large part the study of culture, values, beliefs, and other largely normative constructs, cultural and subcultural explanations for violence and other antisocial behavior have a kind of intrinsic appeal. That is, as a group, social scientists—from anthropologists to sociologists—are inclined to believe in the importance of culture as a determinant of human behavioral differences. Further, to the extent that ethnic, racial, and class boundaries are presumed to mark cultural differences, it is logical to assume a connection between culture and behavior such as interpersonal violence. But, as in many other areas of research, investigators encounter great difficulty in trying to prove or disprove a link between cultural differences and group differences in rates of violence.

These difficulties have led to substantial criticism of the general notion of “subculture,” of a culture of poverty, and of a subculture of violence. Some analysts have advised a complete abandonment of the concepts as useful tools for explaining differences in social behavior across social groups. The main opposition to explanations that focus on culture and subculture has come from the work of social theorists who frequently are labeled as “structuralists.” Although these theorists cannot be characterized as having a single perspective, their work emphasizes the effects of societal inequality and oppression on group differences in the rate of violence. The moorings for this perspective can be traced to the writings of nineteenth-century analysts of crime and violence in Europe, who used maps to show the distribution of such behavior patterns. Their work was the first to suggest a connection among poverty, economic inequality, and antisocial conduct. Thus, while some American social scientists have shown a preference for culture-based explanations for crime and violence, first for whites and later for nonwhites, other European and American scholars have emphasized the role of economic inequality.

**Poverty, Inequality, And Violence: Research And Theory**

French and Belgian researchers A.M. Guerry and Adolphe Quetelet are credited with being among the first to posit a relationship between general economic conditions and antisocial conduct. Guerry found that the wealthiest regions of France during the 1820s had a rate of violent crime
half that found in other areas. Quetelet reported similar findings for France, Belgium, and Holland during the same period. Since Guerry found property crime to be lower in the poorest areas than in more affluent ones, he concluded that poverty itself was not its cause, but he did propose a possible causal link between violent crime and economic deprivation. Quetelet reached the same conclusion and also suggested that periods (or areas) characterized by rapidly changing economic conditions causing persons to pass suddenly from relative affluence to poverty may experience higher rates of crime.

These observations led to numerous studies in Europe and the United States that have attempted to determine the nature of the relationship between economic conditions/status and antisocial conduct. Subsequent researchers attempted to assess the effects of deprivation (poverty), relative deprivation (inequality), and sometimes heightened expectations on interpersonal as well as political violence. Most of these studies have used aggregate crime and socioeconomic data in looking at differences across geographic areas. They have used such economic measures as the rate of unemployment, percentage of people below the poverty line, median income, and the like. The inconclusive and sometimes contradictory results obtained from such investigations have led many to dispute any causal connection between poverty per se and differing rates of crime across groups or areas. But since many of these studies did not specifically assess the impact of such measures on interpersonal violence as a separate category of crime, questions remain regarding the appropriateness of such a conclusion.

Much contemporary research in the United States on the effects of economic conditions on interpersonal violence stems from objections to notions of subculture. Specifically, it arose as a rebuttal to the work of Sheldon Hackney and Raymond Gastil, who claimed to confirm the subculture-of-violence thesis of Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti. Hackney and Gastil used evidence of higher rates of interpersonal aggression in the southern United States in support of the idea that southern cultural values were conducive to and supportive of violence. As my colleagues and I have noted elsewhere, this explanation also has been used to explain the high rates of violence found among contemporary urban blacks.

In response, other researchers sought to show that poverty and other structural factors are more important than cultural values as causes or correlates of interpersonal violence. During the past several decades social researchers have conducted a relatively large number of ecological studies designed to assess the impact of socioeconomic deprivation and inequality on rates of interpersonal violence, especially homicide. In a 1974 study Colin Loftin and Robert Hill used an index of “structural poverty” that
included measures of income, educational attainment, and family structure. They concluded that this measure was highly correlated with state homicide rates.\textsuperscript{31} Later, M. Wayne Smith and Robert Parker reported that structural poverty appeared to affect the rate of homicides between families and friends but not those involving strangers.\textsuperscript{32}

Beginning with the work of Judith Blau and Peter Blau in 1982 and Robert O’Brien in 1983, researchers turned their attention to the effects of inequality or “relative deprivation” (as opposed to poverty) on aggregate rates of violence. The studies of both Blau and Blau and O’Brien reported that levels of income inequality, but not poverty rates alone, across cities were significantly correlated with levels of violent crime.\textsuperscript{33} Follow-up studies by other researchers have both supported and failed to support these initial findings.\textsuperscript{34} Some studies report that both income inequality and poverty affect rates of violence, while other studies report that neither is associated with homicide rate differences across urban areas. Kenneth Land and colleagues suggest that the inconsistencies may stem from methodological flaws. As in the study of other forms of crime, such inconsistent findings have led many to ask whether either poverty or societal inequality are significantly related to the level of violence.

On the other hand, George Vold and Thomas Bernard reported that cross-national studies of homicide rates have produced rather consistent findings supporting a link between inequality and violence.\textsuperscript{35} The major finding of these investigations has been that countries with higher levels of socioeconomic inequality have higher homicide rates.\textsuperscript{36} Steven Messner reported that countries in which there is significant economic discrimination against members of subordinate groups have higher rates of homicide than countries where there is little discrimination, He concluded that the effect of economic discrimination on the level of homicide exceeds the effect of income inequality. William Avison and Pamela Loring found that in addition to income inequality, ethnic heterogeneity also was correlated with high rates of homicide. Ethnic heterogeneity was said to interact with inequality and exacerbate its impact on homicide rates.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite the inconsistency of the findings, these studies may have particular significance for understanding homicide rates in the United States. American society is characterized by high levels of income inequality, greater economic discrimination, and greater racial/ethnic diversity than is true of most other nations. Left unresolved by such investigations is the question of the relative importance of economic factors and conditions versus subcultural differences as explanations for the high rates of interpersonal violence found today among racial and ethnic minorities in America’s urban areas.
The Black Urban Underclass: A Case Study In Theory Construction

It is increasingly clear that for much of the American public, black underclass males symbolize the problems associated with high rates of interpersonal aggression. They represent the group at highest risk for involvement in such violence; consistent with this level of risk, they have become primary targets for both governmental intervention and media attention. In the late 1970s the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) proposed that by 1990 the death rate from homicide among black males ages fifteen to twenty-four should be reduced from 72.5 to 60 per 100,000. Similar reduction goals are proposed for the year 2000.

For many observers, attempts to understand and control the aggression of young black males have given renewed importance to the question of whether group differences in rates of violence result primarily from differences in culture or from the effects of inequality. The concept of the “underclass” has proved a useful conceptual device and social category for debating this issue. For example, much of the attention to the work of sociologist William Wilson has stemmed not so much from his view of the declining significance of race as from his depiction of a persisting underclass stratum in the United States. There is little doubt that the relative size of the black underclass in comparison to the black middle class accounts for much of the difference between African Americans and other racial/ethnic groups in the rates of involvement in crime and violence.

Wilson acknowledged the disproportionate involvement of members of the underclass in crime and violence, but he rejected the notion of a subculture of poverty/violence as a means of portraying and explaining life among the underclass. Despite these objections, the depiction of life among the black urban underclass as shaped largely by dysfunctional values and norms that distinguish them from the larger society has persisted in both the scholarly and the popular literature. Criminologists have begun to explore violence among the “truly disadvantaged” using notions of subcultural difference.

Further, although Wilson has rejected a subculture-of-violence explanation for the plight of the black underclass, many of his descriptions of the group are not substantially different from those offered by subcultural theorists. For example, the underclass is described as geographically isolated from the black middle class and from the larger society and as lacking in certain mainstream values and norms. While Wilson does attempt to identify the economic determinants of such isolation, many of his critics have argued that he pays insufficient attention to the continuing role that racial discrimination and oppression play in perpetuating the black urban underclass. They suggest that institutionalized forms of racism and segregation
have contributed to the geographic and social isolation of the underclass and to the maintenance of economic disadvantages within that group.42

Yet most analysts have not been able to explain why rates of interpersonal violence for the black underclass appear to be substantially higher than those of other underprivileged minorities who also have experienced discrimination, such as Mexican Americans and Native Americans. The absence of explanations based on “purely” economic factors has meant that subcultural theories, or explanations that suggest a causal interaction between economic disadvantage and cultural deficits, are still widely advocated as alternatives.

**Public Policy And The Culture-Versus-Inequality Debate**

I have argued here that despite their logic and appeal to various advocates, neither extant notions of cultural difference nor socioeconomic inequality offer fully satisfactory explanations for the group differences in rates of violence observed in modern America. Apart from their seeming inadequacy for explaining disproportionate rates of violence found among blacks as compared to whites, they offer little explanation for other group differences, past and present. Among these are the comparatively low rates of violence among many Asian populations in the United States, and the comparatively high rates of violence found among some regional sectors of the white population. In addition to these inadequacies, most theories that attempt to account for group differences in violent and aggressive conduct are poorly conceptualized and/or have not been subjected to rigorous empirical testing. Interpersonal violence generally is included among a variety of forms of antisocial conduct whose distinct “causes” are not differentiated.

Nevertheless, it is equally clear that currently proposed intervention/prevention efforts often depend on such etiological views as justification for the proposed remedies for violence. Although public policies arise in response to a variety of political, social, and economic forces, there is substantial evidence that they also stem from or are justified by reference to scientific research and theory. The choice of theoretical views may have many implications for the choice of intervention and prevention strategies that become a part of public policy. Given their observation of ethnic, racial, and areal/spatial differences in the rate and distribution of interpersonal violence, social scientists and public health researchers have offered explanations for these patterns. In doing so, they have tended to favor some theoretical models over others. Conceptualizations that stress the importance of cultural differences, as opposed to poverty and socioeconomic inequality, appear to be the choice of many current social analysts. These conceptualizations also have become the preeminent choices of
nonscholarly commentators and observers, including the media and many public officials.

The effects of inequality are not completely ignored. Especially in conceptualizations of subculture, such inequality is frequently described as one of the determinants of “pathological” or aberrant cultural values. However, models that posit the etiological effects of cultural difference may have quite different public policy implications than models that explicitly propose a direct link between inequality and violence. One policy outcome that appears to stem from an acceptance of “cultural-difference” models is the current proliferation of interventions and preventive efforts aimed at the change of social values among members of high-risk populations. To the contrary, few recently proposed interventions have directly targeted the reduction of socioeconomic deprivation and inequality.

Much of the discussion in this paper centers on the question of whether economic deprivation, inequality, oppression, and similar referents to social conditions within society are distal or proximal “causes” or correlates of group differences in the rate of involvement in violent behavior. We also may ask whether cultural differences represent a set of more proximate causal factors or correlates of violence than do differences in socioeconomic status alone. Unlike in law, where notions of proximate versus less proximate causation are designed to ascertain culpability and blame, in the public policy arena such distinctions frequently lead to views of the likely efficacy and cost-efficiency of proposed solutions to a given social problem. In the area of violence prevention, I suggest that socioeconomic inequality is believed to be a significant correlate and possible cause of violent conduct, but its effects are viewed as less proximate and also perhaps more diffuse than the effects of group cultural difference. Especially when cultural differences are perceived or said to be linked to the condoning or sanctioning of violent conduct (for example, the subculture of violence), interventions aimed at these differences likely are seen as the most effective.

Rosenberg and Mercy did not conclude that subcultural theories offer the best or only explanation for the group differences they documented, but they did acknowledge the important link between theory and policy:

The cultural approach points toward interventions designed to change the norms, values, typical behaviors, or beliefs of specific high-risk groups. Such changes might be accomplished, for example, through education or by changing media images of persons with whom target group members are likely to identify.\(^43\)

Yet it is also clear that other considerations, apart from the fit between theory and policy, also contribute to the seeming preference for cultural-difference explanations for the high rates of violence found among African Americans. American society is characterized by a social and political ethos
that deemphasizes social-class inequality as a persisting aspect of the social structure. Success in eradicating the last remnants of de jure racism during the past three decades also has contributed to a changing perception of the importance of racial oppression. While acknowledging that racial inequality persists, many commentators are far less inclined to attribute such inequality to the effects of racial bias. These views of class and race are evident in public discourse regarding the causes of violence and may partly account for the failure of researchers and the public to appreciate the role that inequality and oppression play in the etiology of interpersonal violence. In a post–War on Poverty and post–Civil Rights era, there appears to be a preference for social policies that minimize the need for structural change or major governmental initiatives as a means of solving America’s social problems. An emphasis on the role of social inequality in the production of violence is at odds with these political sentiments.

I think that such strands of scholarly and ideological logic partly account for the increasing popularity of school-based or other attitude-change interventions aimed at the reduction of violence in minority communities. In addition to the fact that schools provide easily accessible, malleable, “captive” research populations, such interventions are based on the premises outlined above. The reeducation of the children of the urban underclass is seen as the most practical and effective means of altering, or at least counteracting, the violent subcultures in which they are said to exist.

It must be acknowledged that many proponents of interventions that focus on changes of values or culture do not see such programs as replacements for the kind of large-scale institutional alterations perceived to be needed to reduce the level of societal inequality. School-based interventions are seen as “stop-gap” measures that may achieve minimal results while such institutional change is awaited. In such instances only a clearer specification of the rationale underlying intervention and prevention programs will determine from which theoretical camp they emanate. In the absence of such clarity, decisionmakers may run the risk of declaring stop-gap measures as failures when they fail to produce violence reductions of a magnitude that they were never intended to achieve.

Given expectations derived from theory that both culture and socioeconomic conditions may have an impact on rates of violence, policymakers should avoid an either/or mode of intervention. In many instances education-oriented interventions may be combined effectively with job training and other programs designed to enhance the socioeconomic status of high-risk persons and populations. Systematic and long-term evaluation of these efforts then could help both social researchers and policymakers to identify more accurately the causes and determinants of the risk for involvement in interpersonal violence.
NOTES


2. K.D. Harries, Serious Violence: Patterns of Homicide and Assault in America (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas Publishers, 1990). Attention to group differences in the level of risk for interpersonal violence is part of both the public health and the traditional social scientific approaches to the study of violence. While specific interventions may be targeted to specific individuals within identified social groups, determinations of group risk alert would intervene to the need for remedial actions.


7. S.T. Reid, Crime and Criminology (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), 173-224. The theoretical orientations described by Reid and by Rosenberg and Mercy are designed to explain all forms of criminal and antisocial conduct. This conduct includes crimes against property as well as those against the person. Some critics have questioned the usefulness of such global constructs for explaining the causes of the limited range of behavior that constitutes interpersonal violence.


12. Shaw and McKay, Juvenile Delinquency in Urban Areas.


16. Recent media coverage of homicide among blacks reflects certain biases. Given the tendency to focus on young males in urban areas, such coverage ignores the fact that black females have higher rates of homicide victimization and offending than white males, and that older black males and those residing in rural areas are at high risk for being murdered.


22. S. Steinberg, The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 117. While Steinberg’s observation is generally accurate, there were attempts during the past to attribute high rates of white ethnic violence to cultural differences. Criminologists Edwin Sutherland and Thorsten Sellin were among those who proposed the notion of “culture conflict” and “conflict of norms” to explain distinctive rates and patterns of antisocial conduct found among newly arrived immigrants. See E.H. Sutherland, Principles of Criminology (Chicago: J.B. Lippincott, 1934), Chapters 7 and 8; and T. Sellin, Culture Conflict and Crime (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1938).

23. Rose and McClain, Race, Place, and Risk; and Hawkins, “Black and White Homicide Differentials.”


26. See Vold and Bernard, *Theoretical Criminology*.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
34. Vold and Bernard, *Theoretical Criminology*, 140-141; and Land et al., “Structural Covariates of Homicide Rates.”
41. For example, see T.J. Bernard, “Angry Aggression among the ‘Truly Disadvantaged’,” *Criminology* (February 1990): 73-96.