

Facing Violent Crime Among Latinos?

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Facing Violent Crime Among Latinos?

Despite the recent proliferation of research on homicide, scholars have neglected to examine killings among the Latino population (Martinez 1996). While the “long history and large numbers of Latinos in the United States” are well recognized within the social science literature (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993:xix), researchers have shown little concern about the extent and seriousness of the Latino homicide problem. Although prominent public health agencies identify homicide as a major contributor to death among Latinos (Baker 1996; Mercy 1987), few criminological studies are focused on murder among Latinos (Zahn 1987).

The result is an incomplete understanding of Latino homicides (Martinez 1996). Not only is the extent of Latino homicide unknown, the determinants of Latino homicide are also unknown. The purpose of this paper is to enhance our knowledge on the killings of Latinos in the United States. I propose that the impact of immigration and economic deprivation on Latino communities creates a social milieu that varies substantially from the experiences of most other ethnic groups (e.g., Anglo and Black) and that, in turn, influences violence. Also, I compare and contrast the small number of Latino homicide studies, paying special attention to the context within which Latino homicides occur. Finally, I propose future directions in research on Latino-specific links to homicide.

The Exclusion of Latinos

Contemporary research on ethnic variation in urban homicide has typically focused on Anglo and Black killings, despite the tremendous growth of Latinos in almost every city in the United States (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993:xvii). According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Latinos comprised 9% of the total population, or 22.4 million people, a 53% increase from 1980 (Rumbaut 1995). Regardless of population size or growth, scholars know relatively little about patterns of homicide among the third largest ethnic group in the United States (Block 1985; 1993; Martinez 1996).

The exclusion of Latinos from research on the relationship between ethnicity and violence raises the very real possibility that contemporary assumptions about Black and Anglo violence are not applicable to Latinos. This is unfortunate because treating Latinos as a distinct group is necessary in order to advance theory and research on a significant and unique group, typically ignored by most criminologists (Martinez 1997a). Latino homicide patterns appear to differ in some ways from those of Anglos and Blacks (Sampson and Wilson 1995).

Consider that incorporating Latino homicide victims and offenders into traditional ethnic categories (i.e., Anglo or Black), for instance, masks the extent of homicide among three large and distinct populations, providing researchers and policy makers with inaccurate figures on the true nature of killings in the United States (Nelson et al. 1994). Furthermore, ignoring the Latino population bypasses a large and visible segment of American society in many major cities (e.g., Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York City and Washington, D.C.), especially amidst areas with a growing immigrant Latino population (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993).

The remainder of this paper focuses on the need to extend our knowledge about Latino homicide. Two major factors distinguish Latino urban areas from other urban communities: immigration and economic conditions. Prior to continuing the discussion on Latino homicide, I begin by highlighting why we should study Latinos as a separate group, and offer further insight into some features that distinguish Latinos from other ethnic groups, lending credence to a disaggregation strategy.

Immigration and Homicide

Immigration to the United States is a prominent contemporary social issue (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993). Recent studies report that most immigrants reside in urban areas, and are disproportionately of Latino origin (Rumbaut 1995). The result is a markedly different milieu for Latinos as a group than for Anglos or Blacks. Low levels of education and income characterize many immigrant Latinos (Bean and Tienda 1987). Similarly, strained public resources, including poorly funded schools, pervade predominately Latino communities – in particular in the areas where most immigrant Latinos reside (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993). Thus, large numbers of foreign-born Latino are impoverished, and typically live in communities that are inferior to surrounding neighborhoods.

Although immigration is particularly problematic for the Latino population, it has seldom been directly considered in contemporary criminological research. If, as Moore and Pinderhughes (1993:xxvii) note, immigration has a significant impact on poor Latino communities across the United States, indeed on almost every city in every region of the country, then analyses of homicide should incorporate an important influence on Latino conditions – immigration.

The notion that immigration is linked with violence is not recent; indeed it was established by the early research of Shaw and McKay (1931, 1942; see also Shaw 1930). They reported that urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of foreign-born families (and African-American families), were also places with the highest rates of urban juvenile crime. Shaw and McKay also argued that areas close to downtown were continuously populated by successive waves of recent immigrants. The result of this influx was a host of social problems, ranging from infant mortality to crime.

Despite the early connection between immigration and crime established by Shaw and McKay, few subsequent studies have examined the effect of immigration on violence, although a handful of exceptions exist. Muller (1993) notes how “illegal Mexican aliens” are involved in a disproportionate share of arrests in some southern California communities. Valdez (1993) reported that many drug-related crimes and murders in Laredo, Texas were linked to an influx of Mexican immigrants. However, the anecdotal evidence used to substantiate these claims does not systematically link the incidence of crime to immigrants.

At least one contemporary study links immigration and crime, including Latino violence. Alba and colleagues (1994) found that foreign-born Latinos were more exposed to property and violent crime than other Latinos in the greater New York City metropolitan region for 1980. However, these effects are not direct measures of Latino victim rates.

Other contemporary researchers note how one possible effect of immigration on violence is rooted in social disorganization theory. Wilson (1987), for example highlights a common theme in sociological writings, specifically how community disruption contributes to rates of serious crime. Drawing on the urban poverty literature, Wilson (1987:35) outlines some of the mechanism by which immigration could have a critical influence on homicide. He suggests Latino movement to urban areas contributed to increased joblessness, violent crime, and welfare dependency. Thus, the Latino community, in part due to rapid increases in immigration, also experienced greater rates of social dislocation, especially homicide (1987:39).

Although these researchers highlight the importance of immigration for violent crime, they fall short of fully illuminating the influence of Latino immigration on vio-

lence. In short, the studies are few and are not concerned with Latino-specific crime rates. Also, specific studies have certain limitations. Alba et al. (1994) analyze suburban crime patterns in New Jersey, although most Latinos, both native and foreign-born, reside in urban areas and especially in center cities. Valdez (1993) examines poverty, crime and drugs in Laredo, but his findings are limited and discussed in a purely descriptive manner.

Curiously, social scientists have also largely neglected to examine the notion that recent immigrants were more likely to engage in crime than resident citizens. During the 1980s, immigrant crime, in particular violence, reemerged with a vengeance in the popular news media (Hufker and Cavender 1990). This issue was highlighted by the arrival of 125,000 refugees from the Mariel harbor in Cuba, some of whom were reportedly violent criminals released from Cuban prisons (Portes et al. 1985). The Mariels arrived in Miami during a time when an already record high homicide rate was increasing (Muller 1993).

In another study, Martinez (1997b) discovered that the Mariel refugees were rarely the killers portrayed by the media. Instead, relative to their group size, the Mariels were victimized at a proportion greater than their population size would suggest. This suggests that the Mariels were in far greater danger than the more established Cuban Americans who had been residing in the area for a longer period of time.

Economic Deprivation Perspectives

Although the research on immigration and violence is limited, evidence of a link between economic deprivation and homicide has long been present in the social science literature (Parker 1989). Many researchers view violent crime as a consequence of economic inequality (Blau and Blau 1982; Martinez 1996). They postulate that certain racial and ethnic groups within the United States are deprived of social status and economic resources. As a result, feelings of alienation and frustration are particularly high in the disadvantaged group. One response to social and economic deprivation is increased aggression, including high levels of violent criminality. Thus, economic and racial inequality are viewed as the primary influence on criminal violence in urban areas: high rates of homicide correspond to the economic advantage of one racial group over another relatively disadvantaged racial group. Other analyses link measures of economic and/or racial inequality to high levels of homicide (Blau and Blau 1982).

Others suggest that absolute deprivation (low income or poverty) corresponds to higher rates of homicide (Parker 1989). As Parker (1989:986) notes: “Perhaps violence is one of the few options available to those without the economic means to deal with problems and crises of everyday life. Absolute deprivation may also produce emotional situations which escalate into violence, again directed at those close at hand, spouses, children, friends, etc.; simply put, the absolute deprivation approach suggests that violence can occur among such individuals because everyday life is difficult.”

Still others argue the overall body of homicide research fails to fully inform us about murder directly within specific groups, e.g., African-Americans (Sampson 1995; Wilson 1987). Urban communities are characterized by high rates of poverty, female headed households, high school dropouts, and unemployment (Wilson 1987).

Latinos should figure prominently within this debate. Economic conditions among the Latino population rapidly worsened between 1970 and 1980. Levels of Latino poverty increased in most urban areas and Latino families were characterized as part of the working poor. Indeed, by 1995 Latino household income lagged behind every other ethnic group in the United States. Despite rising income for Anglos and Blacks, Latino income declined regardless of nativity status (Goldberg 1997).

The deleterious link between economic conditions and Latino homicide across a large number of cities was first examined by Martinez (1996). He discovered that Latinos’ socioeconomic conditions were consistently linked to murder. The lack of educational attainment and economic inequality within the Latino population strongly influenced urban Latino homicide across the United States.

In sum, there are important empirical and theoretical reasons to expect that immigration should influence violence among Latinos, hand in hand with socioeconomic conditions. Nevertheless, this link has been largely ignored in the criminological literature. As a result, a limited understanding exists of the merits of various arguments regarding immigration and violent crime, especially for Latinos. The section that follows attempts to examine the limited research on Latino homicide, and thereby contributes to our understanding of the consequences of immigration and the socioeconomic determinants of Latino killings.

City Level Studies

Research on homicide, especially at the city level, is rich and extensive. Although the pioneering work of Wolfgang (1958) in Philadelphia remains the foundation for most city-specific homicide studies, others contributed to this research tradition. A 1955 article by Henry a Bullock was among the first to acknowledge the importance of studying Latinos by incorporating “percent Latino” as a predictor of area homicide rates. In addition, Bullock examined Latino assailants and victims in Houston, Texas from 1945-49. Although other papers using similar data from Houston followed, only one provided a descriptive analysis of Anglo, Black, and Latino lethal violence (Pokorny 1965). The other studies incorporated percent “Mexican American” on index crimes in Houston police districts, but did not directly examine killings among Latinos (Beasley and Antunes 1974; Lundsgaarde 1977; Mladenka and Hill 1976).

While early homicide studies incorporated Latinos, most later researchers ignored the Latino population, with some exceptions. Carolyn R. Block (1985, 1993) considered the contributions of Latino killings to the overall patterns of homicide in Chicago from 1965 to 1981. Block discovered in 1985 that increases in the size of the Latino population coincided with increases in Latino homicide. Later, Block (1993) reported that teenage Latino males were at far greater risk of homicide victimization than young Anglo males. In a nine city study, Zahn and Sagi (1987) focused attention on victim-offender relationships, and included three race categories – Anglos, Blacks and Hispanics. However, the number of Latino killings was small since most of the cities in this study had relatively small Latino populations.

Unfortunately, the exclusion of Latinos from this area of research is even more frustrating given that attempts were made to highlight Latino homicide. A workshop on Latino violence and homicide was convened at UCLA in 1987, sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Institute of Mental Health, to compile papers on this topic. Evidence emerged that the patterns of Latino homicide victim rates and circumstances surrounding those killings were quite distinct from non-Latino groups. As but one example, most participants reported that Latinos were at a much higher risk of homicide than Anglos (Block 1993).

At least two other city level studies have also included the Latino population. First, work by Wilbanks (1984) in Dade County (Miami), Florida is notable for a number of reasons. It provides a descriptive account of the extent and severity of Anglo, Black, and Latino killings in Dade County from 1917-1983. It appears that, both numerically and proportionally in 1980, Latino victims constituted the majority of all ethnic group killings, relative to population size. McBride and colleagues (1986) also examined all homicides committed in Dade County between 1978 and 1982. After distributing homicides by ethnicity, they discovered that Latinos were overrepresented as homicide victims, but the proportion varied according to type of killing. Specifically, Latinos dominated the drug-related homicide category, but not other categories (e.g., domestic killings). Both Miami studies are useful, and are among the few that focus on killings in a predominately Latino city.

Most recently, Martinez (1997a) showed that, despite a constant flow of Latino immigrants and declining homicide rates throughout the 1980's, contemporary Miami is characterized by a high rate of Black homicide and a low level of Latino homicide (and in particular a high level of Black-on-Black killings). Typically we expect that homicides are likely to be more common for the most economically disadvantaged group because they encounter different conditions. Therefore, we should expect that Latino killings will be more similar to those of the majority group (Anglos) because of the relatively well-off economic standing of Cubans, while they would be less likely to resemble minority group (Black) homicides in Miami.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper argues for the inclusion of Latinos in homicide studies. There is little debate within other areas in the social sciences that Latinos are a distinct and visible group, but, criminologists continue to ignore the third largest ethnic group in the United States, despite the increase in Latino population in almost every major city (Bean and Tienda 1987).

In sum, I suggest that examining Latino homicide victims and offenders in the traditional way obscures the extent and true nature of killings in the United States (Nelson et al. 1994). Furthermore, bypassing the Latino population ignores the role of immigration as a major phenomenon in most urban communities and its profound influence on Latino areas (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993).

There can be no doubt that Latino neighborhoods are influenced differently by socioeconomic and sociodemographic conditions than are Anglo and Black areas. To illustrate, some scholars note that immigrants have also become a constructive force in many cities (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993). For example, Portes and Stepick (1993) note that immigrants have revitalized areas, strengthened traditional social controls, and created new community institutions. The "hard work ethic" of many immigrants, and numerous resources provided in part through kinship networks, resulted in positive forces in many Latino communities (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993). Though the specific impact of immigration could vary individually from city to city, few have directly examined the impact of this phenomenon on Latino social problems across a large number of cities in the United States.

Furthermore, this paper suggests the need for continued examination of Latinos by homicide researchers. Lane (1986) notes that high homicide rates for European immigrants in turn of the century Philadelphia fell sharply in the second generation, as immigrants were integrated into the economy of the city and were provided more economic opportunities. Latino immigrants face a different situation, with potentially different results. Unlike the turn of the century economy that welcomed unskilled white immigrants, economic advancement for immigrants has proven difficult in contemporary society, especially in the context of economic restructuring (Lane 1986:174). As the Latino population continues to grow (in part, because of greater numbers of immigrants), the relationship between Latino immigration and Latino violent crime will remain an important issue.

This paper has not examined all of the issues associated with the study of Latino homicide. Accordingly, other issues are important as well. The amount of time Latino immigrants have been in the United States has not been examined. Further, the possible varying effects of specific Latino immigrant groups (Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran) have not been disentangled. In addition, the impact of immigration in particular cities (Miami, El Paso, District of Columbia) requires additional attention. Finally, the effects of Latino immigration on other violent crimes such as rape and robbery were not examined. These are all issues worthy of further study of the immigration and crime linkages begun by Shaw and McKay several decades ago.

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