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Murder, American Style

The United States does not have an unusually severe crime problem, but it does have an exceptionally high rate of homicide. This fact does not, by itself, directly explain our high rate of incarceration—the main focus of this book. It may, however, help to explain why many Americans worry a great deal about crime, and why so many responded positively to tough-on-crime political rhetoric during the years of the prison boom.

This chapter provides a comprehensive explanation for the United States' high homicide rate. Some might object that by focusing on conventional, interpersonal homicide, we are defining the concept of murder too narrowly. In the United States, thousands of people are killed every year by unsafe products, dangerous working conditions, and illegal hazardous waste disposal, and these irresponsible corporate actions are not usually understood to be "homicidal" in nature. By excluding these acts of corporate violence from our analysis, we may be reinforcing the erroneous impression that murder is something done mostly by the poor and powerless rather than by the rich and powerful.

We are, for the most part, sympathetic to this argument. However, our aim in this chapter is to set the stage for our critique of political and media claims about violence and the policies that derive from them. These claims and policies largely ignore corporate violence and focus instead on "street crime." In order to critique popular representations and explanations of this type of violence, we also focus on the problem of interpersonal homicide in this chapter.

In what follows, we suggest that four interrelated factors underlie the unusually high rate of interpersonal homicide in the United States:

1. A profusion of guns makes assaultive behavior much more likely to result in death than if guns were not so widely available.

2. High levels of economic and racial inequality, particularly in the form of concentrated urban poverty, create ecological contexts that encourage lethal violence.

3. The illegal drug trade generates a significant amount of deadly violence in the form of battles over turf and drug deals gone bad.

4. In the context of meager job opportunities, a "code of the streets" that prizes respect and regards violence as a necessary means of obtaining it governs conduct in many poor, urban communities.

These four factors are intertwined in complex ways. For example, the drug trade and the code of the streets are both related to the social and economic organization of inner-city neighborhoods, especially the high concentration of poverty and increased family disruption. Therefore, one dominant theme in our discussion of contemporary patterns of homicide will be the significance of the social transformation of ghetto neighborhoods. More generally, we emphasize the way in which a number of social, political, and economic factors interact to produce high rates of deadly violence. Before presenting our argument, however, we critically assess two more popular explanations of lethal violence in America.

Popular Explanations of Violence

When politicians discuss the high U.S. murder rate, they often point an accusing finger at the criminal justice system. The courts and prisons let violent criminals off the hook too easily, they argue, sending the message that crime pays. This argument has been the main rationale for harsh new sentencing laws for adult and juvenile offenders, as well as for the increased use of the death penalty.

But this explanation ignores the fact that homicide rates are much lower in other western democracies that treat violent criminals, including murderers, less punitively than the United States. In the 1980s, before the introduction of harsh new sentencing laws in the United States, the murder rate in Canada was about one third of the U.S. rate; in England, it was about one seventh. If the politicians were right, we would expect

to find that these two countries kept their murder rates under control by treating violent crime more harshly than the United States—but this was not the case.

A cross-national comparison of criminal punishment practices in the 1980s shows that the average U.S. prison term for homicide (50.5 months), a category that includes offenses ranging from first-degree murder to nonnegligent manslaughter, was roughly the same as the average terms served in both Canada (57 months) and England (42.5 months). For robbery, the average term served in the United States (20.9 months) was slightly shorter than the average term served in Canada (23.6 months) but considerably longer than the average term served in England (15.8 months). Overall, these comparisons indicate that U.S. sentences for violent crimes were similar to those in countries that had lower rates of homicide. The similarities end there, however. Less serious offenses—including property, drug, and public order offenses—were punished far more severely in the United States than in comparable countries (Lynch, 1995, p. 11). Moreover, the United States was (and remains) the only western democracy that imposed the death penalty on some of those convicted of murder.

If criminal justice leniency cannot explain the high U.S. homicide rate in the 1980s, it certainly cannot explain it in more recent years. For prisoners released in 1999, the average time served for homicide was 106 months—more than double the average time served in the 1980s (Maguire & Pastore, 2002, Table 6.40). As has been noted, sentences for nonviolent crimes have also become longer in recent years. In short, the United States is not more lenient—and is often more punitive—than comparable countries that have much lower levels of lethal violence.

Politicians and other opinion leaders are also quick to blame the mass media for high rates of lethal violence, apparently with good cause. By age 18, the average American adolescent has viewed about 200,000 acts of violence and 40,000 murders on television alone. The average body count in 1980s action films such as *Die Hard, Rambo III,* and *Total Recall* was just under 60 per movie (Courtright, 1996, pp. 249-250). More recent films, such as *Lethal Weapon 4, Scream 3,* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer,* depict comparable levels of mayhem. Quite plausibly, all this violent imagery encourages people to resort to violence in their own lives and desensitizes them to the real-life consequences of violence. Yet countries that have far lower rates of homicide than the United States, like Canada and Japan, have just as much (if not more) violence in

their television programs and films (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, p. 126). The argument that U.S. violence is caused by violent media imagery thus implies that life imitates art (we use the term loosely) only in the United States.

Images of violence in the mass media might, however, interact with factors peculiar to the United States to foster a relatively high U.S. homicide rate (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997; see also Reiner, 1997; Surette, 1998). In particular, more children in the United States grow up in a context characterized by poverty, neglect, and violence than do children in other industrialized democracies (Currie, 1998; Wilson, 1996). Such children might be especially vulnerable to images of violence in the mass media. Thus, although media violence is almost certainly not a direct cause of homicide, it might be one among many background factors. Unfortunately, there is little published research in the voluminous literature on mass media effects that tests this hypothesis convincingly (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, pp. 124-137). In the sections that follow, we examine factors that we believe are more directly responsible for the high rate of lethal violence in the United States.

Guns

A National Rifle Association bumper sticker states, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Strictly speaking, the slogan is incontrovertible. But so, too, is the observation that people tend to kill people more frequently when guns are readily available. This is because gun assaults are far more likely to result in death than assaults with the next most deadly weapon, the knife (Zimring, 1968). And guns are the instrument of death in 7 out of 10 homicides in the United States, a figure that is unparalleled among industrial democracies (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, p. 108).

The lethality of gun assaults helps to explain the high rate of homicide in the United States. In 1992, assaults in New York were 11 times more likely to result in death than were assaults in London. This difference is largely a consequence of the higher propensity of New Yorkers to attack one another with firearms: Whereas New York residents were as likely to attack one another with a gun as with a knife, Londoners were six times more likely to use a knife. If New Yorkers had assaulted one another with the same mix of weapons as Londoners, the number of deaths resulting from assault would have been about one third of the actual deaths from the assault figure of 2,152 (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, p. 220).

The greater availability of guns in the United States also means that robberies are more likely to result in death. In 1992, the overall death rate for gun robberies in New York was 8.4 per 1,000, about 10 times greater than the death rate for nongun robberies. If the 91,000 New York City robberies in that year had resulted in death at the nongun death rate, 79 New Yorkers would have lost their lives in the course of a robbery. The actual number of deaths from robberies was 357 (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, pp. 45-46).

It is possible that the extraordinary propensity of Americans to use guns in the commission of crimes and to settle disputes reflects a greater motivation to kill. This issue is far from settled, but researchers have accumulated a good deal of evidence suggesting that the ready availability of guns—rather than a greater determination to kill—accounts for the higher rate of homicide in the United States. For example, one study found that 70% of all homicide victims were killed by a single gunshot wound, and that attacks with guns and knives resulting in death were indistinguishable from attacks that did not cause death. On the basis of this evidence, the author of this study concluded that "most homicides were the result of ambiguously motivated assaults, so that the offender would risk his victim's death, but usually did not press on until death was assured" (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, p. 114).

These findings are consistent with what convicted offenders say about their motives in discharging firearms. In interviews with 184 incarcerated people who fired a gun in the course of committing the offense for which they were serving time, only about one third claimed to have shot with the intent to kill. Larger percentages claimed to have fired to "scare the victim" or "to protect myself." Moreover, more than three quarters of these men claimed that they did not intend to actually use their firearm prior to the situation in which they ultimately took aim and fired (Wright & Rossi, 1994).

International comparisons also suggest that the greater availability of guns is a crucial cause of the U.S. homicide problem. Comparisons of Seattle and Vancouver, two cities on opposite sides of the U.S.-Canadian border, show that these cities have similar socioeconomic and demographic characteristics as well as comparable burglary and assault rates. Nevertheless, Seattle, with relatively lax gun control laws, has a homicide rate 60% higher than Vancouver's and a gun homicide rate 400% higher (Reiss & Roth, 1993, p. 268).

Gun availability is also implicated in the recent upsurge in juvenile homicide in the United States. Between 1984 and 1993, the homicide

rate tripled for adolescents 13 through 17 years old and doubled for those 18 through 24. The rates have since come back down, but the sharp rise in youth violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s has something to teach us about the significance of guns. Throughout the entire period in question, the rate of nongun homicides committed by juveniles remained absolutely stable; only the rate of gun murders increased. The surge in juvenile homicide thus appears to be related to the spread of guns among youths (Blumstein & Cork, 1996).

Skeptics might object that something other than gun availability—such as the expanding role of youth in the drug market—is to blame. Later in this chapter, we will argue that drug dealing is, indeed, an important source of lethal violence, and that participation in the crack trade in the late 1980s and early 1990s did spur many youth to arm themselves. However, increased participation of youth in the drug trade does not account for all of the increase in gun-related homicide: The ratio of gun to nongun killings by juveniles rose in all six categories of the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Report, which include killings among family members and intimates, killings in the course of felonies, killings in the course of brawls and arguments, and gang-related killings. A surge in the practice of keeping and carrying guns seems to be a reasonable explanation of the spike in gun homicides among youths (Cook & Laub, 1998).

According to recent estimates, about 200 million guns, including 70 million handguns, are in circulation in the United States. Although the proportion of households possessing any type of firearm has declined from about 50% in the 1970s to 35%-40% in the 1990s, the percentage of households with a handgun increased during this period to about 25% (Wintemute, 2000). The United States now has more federally licensed gun dealers than gas stations (Wallman, 1997).

Perhaps most disturbing is the extent to which guns have proliferated among young people. In a survey of 96 randomly selected elementary, middle, and high schools,

> fifteen percent of students reported carrying a handgun in the past 30 days, and four percent reported taking a handgun to school during the year. Nine percent of the students reported shooting a gun at someone else, while eleven percent had been shot at during the past year. (Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996, p. 73)

The massacres of schoolchildren and their teachers by heavily armed classmates in Jonesboro, Arkansas; Littleton, Colorado; and elsewhere,

recently explored in the popular film *Bowling for Columbine,* are an especially stark reminder of how serious the crisis has become. In the United States, guns are literally everywhere, and their contribution to the country's extraordinary rate of killing is evident.

Inequality and Homicide

Opponents of gun control often point out that widespread gun ownership is not associated with high rates of lethal violence in a few countries (such as Canada, Israel, and Switzerland) (Gurr, 1989). Human intentions do matter. People do, indeed, kill people. In the rest of this chapter, we consider the social, political, and economic factors that encourage Americans to use violence and risk death in the course of settling their disputes.

We begin with economic and racial inequality. A meta-analysis of the research on this subject reports that there is a "consensus that the incidence of homicide is higher in countries with greater income inequality" (Krahn, Hartnagel, & Gartrell, 1986, p. 269). In their analysis of 65 nations, these researchers found that the correlation between the homicide rate and various measures of economic inequality is especially strong in democracies and wealthier countries. A more recent study similarly found a strong relationship between economic discrimination and the homicide rate: Countries that practice "deliberate, invidious exclusion" on the basis of ascribed characteristics such as race have the highest rates of killing (Messner, 1989).

These cross-national comparisons suggest that the elevated rate of homicide in the United States is at least partially a consequence of the country's pronounced disparities in wealth and its history of racial discrimination. Exhibit 3.1 shows that the income gap between the rich and poor is much higher in the United States than in other western democracies. Furthermore, as Exhibits 3.2 and 3.3 show, economic inequality in the United States is structured along racial and ethnic lines and is especially devastating for children. Although often assumed to have been alleviated by racial reform, these inequalities actually deepened during the 1980s and early 1990s, with average African American and Hispanic family incomes dropping to 54% and 60%, respectively, of average white family income. In the late 1990s, these long-term trends finally reversed themselves, with minority households gaining a few percentage points against their white counterparts. In 2001, however, the income gaps remained huge.[1]
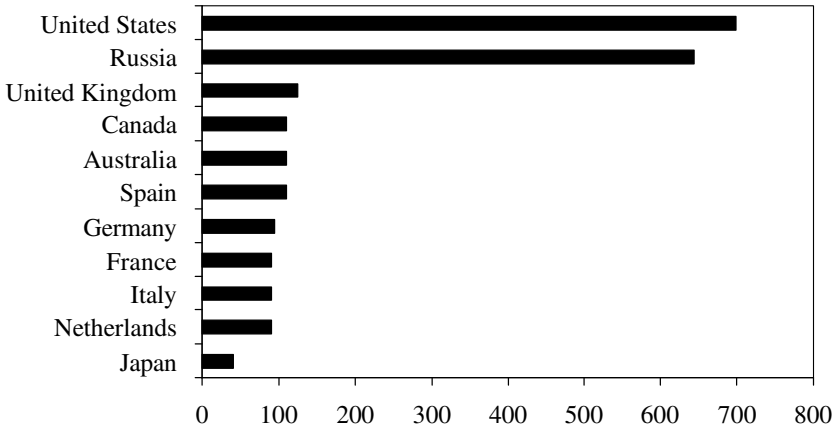
Exhibit 3.1   International Income Inequality
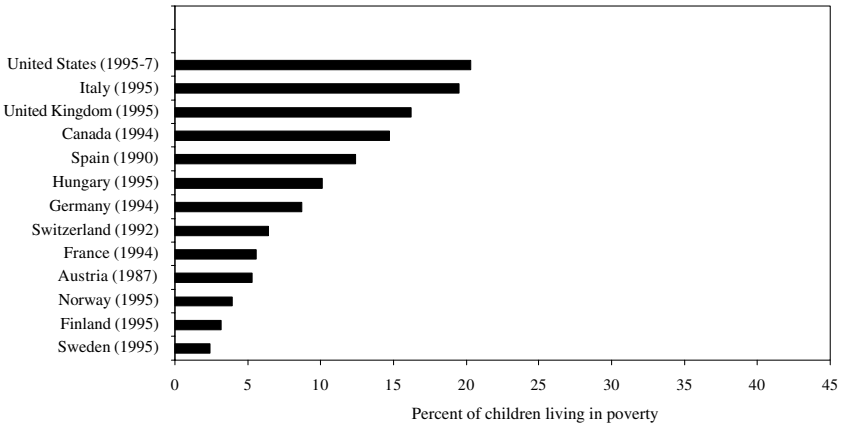
SOURCE: OECD (2000).

Exhibit 3.2   International Child Poverty

SOURCE: Vleminckx and Smeeding (2001).

A rich sociological tradition helps to explain the relationship between inequality and elevated levels of violence. Roughly 100 years ago, French sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that elevated levels of suicide and homicide reflect a societal breakdown in norms—"anomie," in the technical language of sociology—occasioned by a widening gap
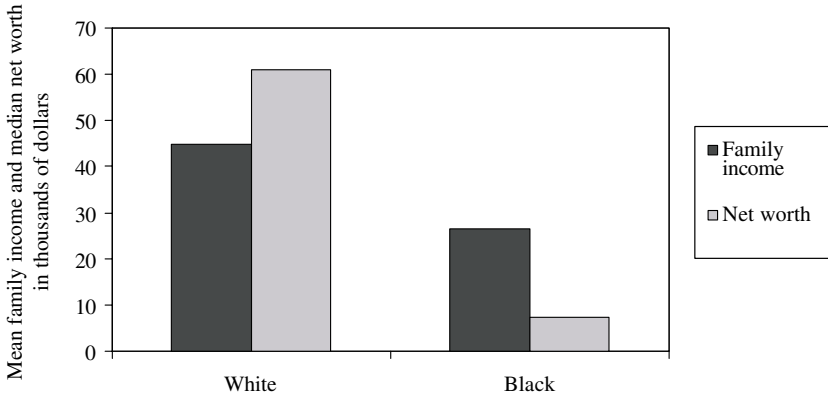
Exhibit 3.3   U.S. Economic Inequality by Race

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998), Tables 51 and 55; Wolff (1998).

between people's dreams and aspirations, on one hand, and their actual life experiences, on the other. When such a breakdown prevails, people experience bouts of frustration, despair, and outright anger and become more prone to destruction of both self and other (Durkheim, 1951).

In the late 1930s, American sociologist Robert K. Merton employed the concept of anomie to explain the apparently high rate of crime in the United States relative to other, similar countries. Merton argued that a great deal of crime in the United States can be explained by a contradiction between the dominant cultural code, which prescribes material success above all else (the American Dream), and the economic organization of society, which denies to most people the routine means for achieving such success. To resolve this contradiction, Merton argued, many people turn to crime (as a way to achieve material success through alternative means) or addiction (as a way to escape the pressure to succeed) (Merton, 1938).

Anomie theory helps us to understand why the cross-national correlation between inequality and homicide is especially strong in democracies and wealthy countries. In democracies, the promise of equal access to "the good life" is most vigorously advanced, and thus, it is in democracies that arbitrary denial of opportunities is experienced as most intolerable. The fact that a great deal of frustration-induced violence gets acted out among family members, acquaintances, and neighbors rather than against the rich and powerful does not contradict this argument.

Rather, it suggests that people close at hand are simply convenient targets for pent-up anger (Messner, 1989, p. 598).[2]

But it is not just the anger and frustration born of high levels of inequality, or the strategic efforts of individuals to achieve material success against all odds, that help to explain the connection between inequality and violence. Countries with higher levels of social and economic inequality typically possess ecological and neighborhood conditions that directly contribute to high levels of violence.

The Ecology of Urban Violence

There is a tendency, when thinking about the causes of violence, to focus on the characteristics of individuals and groups, such as family history, level of education, and household income. These personal characteristics are less helpful in explaining serious violence than are the qualities of residential neighborhoods. Indeed, because lethal violence is overwhelmingly concentrated in poor urban communities, understanding these neighborhood characteristics is crucial. In the suburban areas where most white Americans live, rates of homicide are comparable to those in Finland. By contrast, half of all U.S. homicides occur in the 63 largest American cities—which house only 16% of the U.S. population (Sherman, 1997). Even within urban areas, the risk of homicide victimization is quite uneven: In areas of concentrated poverty, where racial minorities are more likely to live, rates of homicide are 20 times the national average (Sherman et al., 1997, p. v). An ecological or community-level approach is best able to explain the concentration of violence in poor urban communities.[3]

This type of explanation also has well-established roots in the sociological literature on crime and delinquency. More than five decades ago, in a landmark study, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas,* Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay reported that the distribution of delinquency across Chicago neighborhoods remained constant over many years despite population turnover. In other words, although the ethnic composition of these high-delinquency areas changed, the propensity of these neighborhoods to generate troublesome youths did not. To explain this pattern, these sociologists identified certain unchanging features of high-delinquency areas, especially their low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and high rates of residential mobility. These factors, they suggested, had the effect of undermining neighborhood social organization, especially the capacity of adults to exercise control over young people. In the absence of effective adult supervision and control, juvenile delinquency flourished (Shaw & McKay, 1942).[4]

Taking their lead from Shaw and McKay, contemporary researchers have demonstrated that the most violent urban neighborhoods are characterized by a cluster of "social dislocations." These dislocations include racial segregation, high rates of poverty, joblessness, family disruption, and residential instability (Land, McCall, & Cohen, 1990; Messner & Tardiff, 1986; Sampson, 1987, p. 366; Zimring & Hawkins, 1997). Elijah Anderson (1999) describes the residents of one such Philadelphia neighborhood in the 1990s:

> It is mostly a very poor neighborhood of women and small children, who make up extremely important kinship networks that work to sustain their members; at times, others are enlisted as fictive kin for needed help. These residents, if they are employed, work as dishwashers, mechanics, and domestics, as well as other menial jobs. . . . A large number of the women are on welfare. . . . When present at all, men appear most often in the roles of nephew, cousin, father, uncle, boyfriend, and son, but seldom husband. (pp. 27-28)

In such neighborhoods, poor, young, and overwhelmed single mothers are often unable to exercise control over children and adolescents, especially teenage peer groups in public spaces (Sampson, 1997).

Like Shaw and McKay, contemporary scholars have demonstrated that it is not the racial or ethnic composition of such places that explains their extraordinary rates of homicide. A comparison of two Manhattan neighborhoods in the mid-1980s illustrates this point well. The Bowery, with an only average-sized black population but a high concentration of poor people, had a homicide rate among the highest of the city's neighborhoods. By comparison, Stuyvesant Town-Cooper Village, with an average-sized black population but a relatively low poverty rate, had a homicide rate well below the average. Quantitative analysis of the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and homicide rates across Manhattan neighborhoods reinforces the obvious conclusion: It is the degree to which a neighborhood suffers from poverty-related social dislocations, not its racial composition, that helps to explain its homicide rate (Messner & Tardiff, 1986).

The Relevance of Race

This is not to say, however, that the problem of lethal violence in the United States is racially neutral. In the first place, residents of "high-poverty areas"—areas inhabited by high numbers of poor people—are

overwhelmingly African American and/or Hispanic. In New York City, for example, 70% of the city's poor black and Hispanic residents live in high-poverty neighborhoods, but 70% of the city's poor whites live in nonpoverty neighborhoods (Sullivan, 1989).[5] Nationwide, nearly 7 out of 8 people living in a high-poverty urban area are members of a minority group. As one scholar, Loic Waquant, put it, "American urban poverty is pre-eminently a racial poverty . . . rooted in the ghetto as a specific social form and mechanism of racial domination" (Sampson, 1997, p. 68).

Second, to understand the expansion of ghetto poverty, we must examine the interplay between economic changes and racial discrimination. The most significant economic development in this context is the process called *deindustrialization*. This restructuring of the economy began in the 1970s and resulted in a massive loss of manufacturing jobs in central cities. In 1997, for example, New York City had approximately 925,000 manufacturing jobs, down from 1.5 million in 1978 (Perez-Pena, 1997, p. A14). The loss of manufacturing jobs in urban areas has not been fully offset by the expansion of the service sector, where wages for unskilled workers are markedly lower, and where jobs are more likely to be temporary and less likely to provide benefits such as health insurance.

The sharp increase in joblessness among African American males that resulted from this economic restructuring reduced the pool of "marriagable men," which in turn contributed to the proliferation of single-parent households and the intensification of inner-city poverty. Meanwhile, middle-class blacks seized the opportunities created by new laws banning discrimination in housing and fled the ghetto. In their wake, they left neighborhoods composed mainly of jobless men and poor, female-headed, single-parent families (Wilson, 1987). Research examining the relationships among homicide rates, levels of poverty, and family structure suggests that the increase in single-parent families in these poor communities has had significant consequences. In African American communities, for example, the percentage of families headed by a single parent is the strongest predictor of the homicide rate and is, in turn, strongly associated with the rate of joblessness among men (Sampson, 1987).[6]

Although deindustrialization was not motivated by racial considerations or intended to have racially disparate consequences, its effects have been particularly catastrophic for black urban communities because of the prior existence of racial segregation. Had poor blacks lived in racially

integrated neighborhoods throughout metropolitan areas, deindustrialization would have driven up rates of black poverty but would not have produced isolated neighborhoods characterized by highly concentrated poverty.[7]

Racial segregation is, of course, a product of racial discrimination. In the South and elsewhere, local ordinances once prevented African Americans from living in white neighborhoods. In the North, white property owners attached "restrictive covenants" to their properties to prevent transfer to blacks (and Jews). In the 1960s, under the rubric of "urban renewal" (dubbed "Negro removal" by literary critic James Baldwin), federal and municipal agencies destroyed about 20% of all central-city housing occupied by blacks (Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 114). The federal government did eventually extend mortgage assistance—long the ticket to home ownership for whites—to African Americans, but only to subsidize home ownership within all-black neighborhoods. New public housing was built but invariably located within the confines of the ghetto (Wilson, 1996; see also Levine & Harmon, 1993).

Despite laws banning housing discrimination, the situation is not much improved today. High levels of racial residential segregation cannot be explained by either the preferences of African Americans or their socioeconomic situation. Rather, ongoing housing discrimination and prejudice continue to keep many poor and working-class African Americans in the ghetto (Massey, 1990, p. 354).

In sum, the relatively high rate of lethal violence in poor minority neighborhoods is not a consequence of their racial composition. Instead, it is related to the nature of the neighborhoods in which so many African Americans and Latinos must struggle to make a life. Social inequality and racial discrimination, both past and ongoing, have played a central role in the formation of ghetto neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, joblessness, and single-parent families. In what follows, we discuss two ways in which these social conditions give rise to high levels of serious interpersonal violence.

The Drug Trade

One connection between the ecological conditions of poor communities and lethal violence is the drug trade. The concentration of street-level drug dealing in ghetto neighborhoods is not new. Poor neighborhoods inhabited by ethnic minorities have long acted as

"deviance service centers," providing illicit goods and services to surrounding communities (Hagan, 1994, p. 97). In the context of deindustrialization, however, the drug trade emerged as an especially important source of employment. With urban manufacturing jobs increasingly scarce, many people have found the drug market to be a more attractive alternative than low-paying, unstable, and often degrading work in the expanding service sector. On average, selling drugs pays somewhat better than the available service sector jobs. Moreover, the drug industry "offers hope, however illusory, of self-determination and economic independence, as contrasted with the petty humiliations and daily harassment faced in secondary service sector jobs" (Bourgeois, 1995, p. 141).

Unlike most legal work, however, drug dealing is highly dangerous. And it became dramatically more so in the 1980s and early 1990s with the advent of crack cocaine. The percentage of New York City homicides in which drugs played a significant role increased from 24% in 1984 to an astounding 53% in 1988 (when the popularity of crack cocaine peaked) (Goldstein, Brownstein, Ryan, & Belluci, 1989). Similarly, Washington, DC's homicide rate surged between 1986 and 1988 as the number of killings recorded as "drug related" climbed to 53% (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, p. 248).[8] In the years since, the shrinking market for crack cocaine has been linked to a declining incidence of homicide (Johnson, Golub, & Dunlap, 2000).

These studies clearly show that drugs and violence are interrelated, but what is the nature of the relationship? Researchers have identified three types of drug-related homicide:

- "Psychopharmacological" killings are those caused by drug or alcohol intoxication, such as when a person gets high and acts out in a violent fashion.

- "Economic compulsive" killings are those committed in the course of property crimes, such as robberies, and motivated by the need for money to buy drugs.

- "Systemic" killings are the result of conducting business in an illegal market. Illegal markets are characterized by high profit margins and offer no recourse to the legal system to settle disputes.

Homicide records in New York City show that during the peak of the crack epidemic, only 15% of drug-related homicides seemed to have psychopharmacological causes, and just 4% fit the economic compulsive

model. By contrast, nearly 80% of all drug-related homicides were systemic in nature. Moreover, these systemic killings constituted nearly 40% of all homicides during the sample period (Goldstein et al., 1989). Contrary to popular impressions, then, it is not the chemical effects of illicit drugs but the nature of the illegal drug trade that accounts for much drug-related violence.

Here are just three examples of the kinds of systemic conflicts generated by illegal drug markets:

> [T]he victim in case #31 was a thirty-year-old male. He had been previously ousted from his drug sales location and had returned in an attempt to reassert his claim to the area. He was shot by a twenty-four-year-old male. Police report that this was not an isolated event, but part of a continuing turf war between two gangs. The perpetrator fled to Washington, DC, where he, in turn, was killed by associates of the victim.
>
> In case #369 . . . the victim was a twenty-seven-year-old female crack user. The perpetrator was a twenty-two-year-old male who was both a crack user and a low-level crack dealer. He had lent her both money and crack, but she was not able to repay the debts. They engaged in an argument at a street crack sales location, which culminated in the woman being stabbed once in the chest.
>
> In case #277, the victim was a thirty-two-year-old male. The perpetrator was a seventeen-year-old male. On a prior occasion, the victim had robbed the perpetrator of money and crack. The perpetrator subsequently shot the victim once in the abdomen in retaliation. (Goldstein et al., 1989, pp. 120-121)

All illegal drug markets tend to give rise to systemic violence, but the particular features of the crack trade and the socioeconomic context in which it emerged exacerbated this tendency. Crack was essentially a marketing innovation that made cocaine available in smaller and cheaper quantities to a broader segment of the public. The effects of crack cocaine are also extremely short lived. For both of these reasons, the crack market was, at its peak, characterized by a greater number of exchanges than is typically found in other drug markets. With an increase in the number of illicit exchanges comes an increase in the number of potential conflicts—and thus in the number of conflicts that can lead to murder. In addition, the fact that crack cocaine is relatively easy

and cheap to make meant that people without much start-up capital could move into the trade, and the lack of legal alternatives enhanced their willingness to use and risk violence while doing so. The result was a high degree of instability in the market, a comparatively large number of exchanges, and intense competition over turf. For all these reasons, the crack trade in particular seems to have an especially strong link to lethal violence.

Ironically, the war on drugs has likely contributed to the problem of drug-related violence. Between 1980 and 2001, the number of people arrested on drug charges more than tripled to nearly 1.6 million (FBI, 2002, Table 29). During the same period, the number of people incarcerated on drug charges grew from roughly 40,000 to 450,000, or by more than 1,000% (King & Mauer, 2002a, p. 2). Arresting and jailing so many (alleged) drug dealers disrupts turf arrangements and triggers violent struggles to establish control over newly available territory. By destabilizing the drug trade, the police crackdown may have contributed to its violent character.

In addition, mass drug arrests have undermined the capacity of many minority men and women to obtain jobs and support families. Roughly 4 out of 5 people jailed for a drug offense are either black or Hispanic, and many of these are men from high-poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods. Jailed men do not marry and raise their children; neither do men who cannot get a good job because of a criminal record. In fact, studies have shown that those who have experienced incarceration are significantly less likely to obtain employment than are similarly situated defendants sentenced to alternatives (such as probation) (Freeman, 1991; Petersilia & Turner, 1986; Western & Beckett, 1999). By arresting and jailing such a large number of minorities, the war on drugs has become a significant source of joblessness and family disruption in poor neighborhoods, two social conditions that are strongly associated with high levels of homicide.

The Code of the Streets

Concentrated poverty generates cultural as well as economic adaptations, and these developments are also implicated in elevated rates of violence. Pervasive feelings of despair due to high rates of joblessness, widespread drug abuse, and severely limited educational and economic opportunities have led to the emergence of an oppositional "code of the

streets" (Anderson, 1994, p. 82). In this section, we discuss the emergence of this code, paying particular attention to its implications for the problem of lethal violence. However, we wish to emphasize that the attitudes and practices described below are linked to cultural patterns that extend far beyond American inner cities. To borrow a distinction from sociologist William Julius Wilson, these cultural developments are "ghetto-related" but not "ghetto-specific" (Wilson, 1996). Those who articulate and live by the code are as American as apple pie.

At the heart of the code of the streets, according to sociologist Elijah Anderson, "is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated 'right,' or granted the deference one deserves" (Anderson, 1994, p. 82). Having respect means that one can avoid being bothered or menaced by others. This is especially important in violent areas, where vague slights can escalate into violent conflicts and where faith in the ability or willingness of the police to impose order is nonexistent. From a practical standpoint, "respect" is maintained through the projection of a menacing public presence: "One's bearing must send the unmistakable if sometimes subtle message to 'the next person' in public that one is capable of violence and mayhem when the situation requires it, that one can take care of oneself" (Anderson, 1994, p. 88). Anthropologist Philippe Bourgeois (1997) makes a similar point in his discussion of the "culture of terror" surrounding the drug trade:

> Behavior that appears irrationally violent and self-destructive to middle class (and working class) observers can be more accurately interpreted according to the logic of the underground economy as judicious public relations, advertising, rapport building, and long-term investment in one's "human capital." (p. 66)

Because of its utility in deterring aggression, young people living in poor urban areas often project a menacing posture whether they are genuinely committed to the code of the streets or not. But for the smaller number of young people who are heavily invested in street culture, respect is about more than warding off unwanted aggression. Hard won and easily lost, it is an absolute precondition for dignity and self-respect, especially for young men. "Manhood and self respect are flip sides of the same coin; physical and psychological well-being are inseparable and both require a sense of control, of being in charge" (Anderson, 1994, p. 89).

On the streets, respect is often pursued through character contests involving displays of masculine "nerve":

> Nerve is shown when one takes another person's possessions (the more valuable the better), "messes with" someone's woman, throws the first punch, "gets in someone's face," or pulls a trigger. Its proper display helps on the spot to check others who would violate one's person and also helps to build a reputation that works to prevent future challenges. But because such a show of nerve is a forceful expression of disrespect toward the person on the receiving end, the victim may be greatly offended and seek to retaliate with equal or greater force. A display of nerve, therefore, can easily provoke a life threatening response, and the background knowledge of that possibility has often been incorporated into the concept of nerve. (Anderson, 1994, p. 92)

The zero-sum nature of such character contests helps to explain why conflicts that seem petty to those on the outside can lead to violence and even murder.

> True nerve exposes a lack of fear of dying. Many feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over the principle of respect. In fact, among the hardcore street oriented, the clear risk of violent death may be preferable to being "dissed"[9] by another. (Anderson, 1994, p. 92)

This emphasis on getting respect is not unique to youth street cultures in the inner city. Neither is the notion that men must establish their masculinity by being tough in the face of challenges from other men. What is different is the context in which these displays of nerve and masculinity occur. Elsewhere in society, young men have multiple avenues for attaining status and demonstrating manhood. In increasingly poor and isolated urban neighborhoods, however, most of the conventional avenues for doing so are dead ends. This is even truer in prisons, where the code of the streets is found in its purest form. Ironically, the massive expansion of incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s has exposed ever-increasing numbers of people to this environment and has thus strengthened the hold that the code of the street has on some urban communities (Miller, 1996).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that the unusually high rate of homicide in the United States stems primarily from four interrelated factors: the

ubiquity of guns, comparatively high levels of social and racial inequality and the concentrated urban poverty with which they are associated, the drug (and especially crack) trade, and a code of the streets that prizes respect and deference above all else. These deadly developments reinforce each other in complex ways. For example, the code of the streets has been strengthened by the spread of the drug trade and contributes to its lethal character. Both of these encourage the acquisition of firearms, even among those not directly involved in the drug trade. Inequality and racial discrimination facilitate violence by creating a sense of injustice and frustration and by contributing to the concentration of poverty in racially segregated neighborhoods. Concentrated poverty, in turn, encourages the code as well as the trade in drugs. No good purpose is achieved by trying to reduce this complexity to a simple mono-causal argument.

The U.S. homicide rate dropped between 1993 and 2000 by about one third. Politicians' claims notwithstanding, this welcome development does not necessarily mean that the "get tough on crime" policies are working effectively. As discussed previously, there is no clear or straightforward relationship between penal severity and the volume of crime in society (Zimring & Hawkins, 1995). This is true even in the context of recent U.S. history: In the first half of the 1980s, the homicide rate declined while the prison population expanded; in the second half of the 1980s, the homicide rate returned to its earlier level while the prison population continued its expansion (Tonry, 1995). Before abandoning these and other lessons of history, we ought to consider alternative explanations for the declining homicide rate.

The best alternative explanation concerns changes in the drug market. As we have seen, the spread of the drug trade stemming from the introduction of crack in the second half of the 1980s contributed to the rise in homicide in that period. In the 1990s, moreover, declines across metropolitan areas in the number of people arrested who tested positive for cocaine (a measure of the vitality of the crack trade) were closely associated with declines in homicide rates. In other words, the decline of the crack market appears to correspond to the decline in the incidence of lethal violence (Butterfield, 1997a, p. A10). We discuss this and additional explanations for the crime drop in Chapter 8.

Although the U.S. homicide rate is indeed high relative to other western democracies—and remains so even after the recent declines—this fact does not directly explain the country's imprisonment boom. However, it is possible that high levels of lethal violence lend credence to political

claims regarding the severity of the U.S. crime problem and render some members of the American public more receptive to calls to crack down on criminal offenders. To better understand the context in which such popular perceptions and sentiments come into being, we turn to the areas of politics and culture. In the next chapter, we begin this inquiry by exploring the changing role of crime in political discourse.