The Poverty Straw Man

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Some recent articles on conservative American websites assert that 1) liberals believe that poverty is the main or sole cause of crime in the United States, and that 2) this is not true, therefore the liberal position regarding the race-crime relationship is wrong. One example of this argument is found in a *National Review* blog post by prominent conservative commentator Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute. In the post, Mac Donald discusses a story of a gang leader who drove his Mercedes through a neighborhood “looking for someone to shoot”, and who then decides to shoot one of his former gang brothers in both thighs for no apparent reason. She then writes: “Poverty had nothing to do with this gratuitous violence. The millionaire Jimenez was a master of conspicuous consumption, like so many gangbangers. Nor does any hypothesized “poverty” in his childhood explain such predatory behavior. There was real poverty in the Great Depression — no welfare recipients with smartphones and cable TV then — and crime rates were negligible.” (cri, a) Further examples of basic arguments to a similar effect can be found in two recent commentary articles in the *Journal of Criminal Justice.* (Walsh and Yun, 2017) (Latzer, 2018)

In critiquing this argument, I could begin by noting that, contrary to Mac Donald’s ham-fisted attempt to stoke resentment toward the poor by implying that their poverty is only nominal, smartphone use is often the only way for low-income households to access the internet. Such a connection is essential for functioning in the contemporary United States, given the central role of the Internet in so many aspects of our society. (lif) I could also note that television prices in the United States have been dropping significantly for decades, meaning that even poor people can now often afford to own one. (ame, a) or that poor people spend significantly less than the average American on pretty much everything, from alcohol to entertainment to housing to food. (bbf) These points, however, fall outside the scope of this paper, which focuses on the relationship between race, poverty, and crime in the contemporary United States. Instead, I will examine the assumption that those on the left believe that poverty is the sole or primary cause of crime.

First, Mac Donald asserts that crime rates in the United States were “negligible” despite much higher poverty rates during the Great Depression. Research by Fishback et al. (2010) indicates that spending on FDR’s government relief efforts reduced crime during the Great Depression. They also found evidence that this effect was especially large for work relief. (Fishback et al., 2010) This result implies that crime rates being as low as they were during the Great Depression may not have been the indictment of liberal views on neighborhood economic factors causing crime Mac Donald believes it to be. Instead, such rates would likely have been significantly higher had FDR not responded by increasing government welfare spending in response to the depression.

In fact, poverty *per se* is not as strong of a predictor of crime in the United States as other conceptualizations of disadvantage are. Concentrated poverty and other forms of disadvantage tend to attract high violent crime rates. (Friedson and Sharkey, 2015) Given the high degree of racial segregation in America today, it should thus be no surprise that rates of crime, be it overall or violent, tend to be higher in predominantly
black neighborhoods. This effect is best established for homicide: high levels of racial segregation result in higher levels of disadvantage in black and Latino neighborhoods, which, in turn, results in higher homicide rates in such neighborhoods.\cite{PetersonKrivocorr1999}\cite{Feldmeyer2010} Disadvantage, in this context, encompasses not only poverty rate but also female headship rates, both of which are associated with higher racial gaps in rates of homicide and other violent behaviors.\cite{Ulmeretal2012} Racial inequality in wealth and variations in opportunity structures across neighborhoods are both also important determinants of black-white differences in homicide offending.\cite{VELEZetal2003}\cite{PARKERandMcCALL1999} The effects of concentrated poverty on homicide rates in U.S. neighborhoods tend to be racially invariant when blacks and whites are compared, providing further confidence in the ability of social environmental factors to explain race differences in homicide and other violent crime rates.\cite{Lee2000}\cite{HannonandDeFina2005}

Next, I will consider another argument made by some commentators regarding the relationship of poverty, race, and crime in the United States: namely, that some/all Asian Americans face more poverty than residents of American inner cities and/or African Americans, yet crime rates among these Asian Americans are lower, not higher, than are those of their urban and/or black counterparts. As Mac Donald (2017) put it, "Many Asian immigrant families today have lower incomes than average inner-city residents, yet their children's crime rates are also negligible." Similarly, Walsh & Yun (2017) assert that "the black homicide rate was 17.3 times larger than the Asian rate," based on 2013 U.S. data. They later argue that "It would be naïve to suggest that the lingering effects of slavery and racism have not had at least some effect on the behavior of blacks in America, but this does not explain why they would be so affected by their history of victimization when Asians seem not to be affected at all."

This argument—that discrimination is an insufficient explanation for the economic status and rates of violence among African Americans—was originated by conservatives in the mid-20th century to justify the maintenance of white supremacy.\cite{Poonetal2016} Often referred to as the "model minority myth", it ignores, among other things, the fundamental differences in the ways in which Africans and Asians originally came (or were brought against their will) to America and the extent to which they were oppressed and discriminated against since coming here. It also ignores the significant amount of variability between richer Asian-Americans (e.g., Japanese Americans) and their poorer counterparts (e.g., Bhutanese Americans), as well as the high degree of selectivity in the process by which Asian Americans have come to the United States.\cite{ZhouLee2014} Of note, this selectivity, which favored more educated immigrants from Asia, was due in large part to the Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished the national quota system for immigrants and favored Asian immigrants with professional degrees.\cite{Yietal2016} Lastly, it should be noted that higher family incomes for Asian Americans are largely an artifact of a higher number of working-age people living in each family, and the fact that Asian Americans tend to live in states where people make more money on average.\cite{cri,Cas,ame,b}(p. 268)

What does this mean? It means that arguments pointing to Asian Americans and saying "what about them? They were discriminated against too and they don’t commit crimes as often as African Americans do" ignore many important facts. Among the very important facts in regard to this subject is residential segregation: rates thereof are exceptionally high for African Americans and low for Asian Americans.\cite{RughandMassey2010} It is for this reason, and others, that research has indicated that factors like community disadvantage and situational variables, rather than culture, are sufficient to account for relatively low crime/delinquency rates among Asian Americans.\cite{McNULTYandBELLAIR2003}\cite{FeldmeyerandCui2014} This is to the extent that Asian Americans even engage in crime and delinquency at a lower rate than do whites: there is some evidence that this is not true, at least for delinquency.\cite{ChoiLahey2006} Researchers that promote the "model minority" stereotype should take into account the evidence of the harmful effects of such stereotypes on Asian Americans themselves,\cite{Cas} and the heterogeneity of the Asian-American community with regard to criminal involvement (and so many other phenomena).\cite{ame,b}
References


