

Race, Ethnicity, Crime, and Justice

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Edited by

Matthew B. Robinson



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Preface

If you've seen the news at all in the past year, you are likely at least aware that the US criminal justice system has a serious *race* problem. Among the many cases of unarmed black men being killed by the police are these:

- Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (who was shot dead after being warned about walking in the middle of a street);
- Jonathan Ferrell in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina (who was shot dead after surviving a car accident and merely trying to seek help);
- Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio (who was shot dead by two officers seconds after they arrived on the scene of a call from a person who told the police a male was pointing a pistol at people but that it was “probably fake” [it was]);
- John Crawford in Beavercreek, Ohio (who was shot dead in Walmart while holding a toy gun); and
- Eric Garner (who was strangled to death on camera with an illegal chokehold maneuver in New York City).

Similarly, issues of *ethnicity* have regularly been in the news, as well. One prominent example is that of immigration in the US—and especially *illegal immigration*—an issue highly relevant to criminal justice. For example, more than 60,000 people each year are convicted for immigration crimes such as illegal entry into the country (Kirkham, 2013), burdening courts and swelling prison populations.

Race is a descriptive term used to refer to a group of people that share, or are perceived to share, common hereditary traits such as skin color, hair texture, or eye shape. In the US, we use terms like “Black” and “White” or “African American” or “Caucasian” when referring to different racial groups. **Ethnicity** is more broadly defined as having shared cultural traits like language, food, religion, customs, and traditions. In the US, data on ethnicities are gathered in a more limited way—for example, in the US Census we are asked to identify as “Hispanic or Latino” or “Not Hispanic or Latino.”

For about as long as the disciplines of criminology and criminal justice have existed, scholars have studied relationships between race and ethnicity and crime and justice processing. Key questions include who is most processed by agencies of criminal and juvenile justice, and why? Data from the US Census Bureau (US Census, 2014) and The Sentencing Project (2014) show that, in 2012, for example, African Americans and Latinos collectively made up about 30% of the US population (13% African American, 17% Latino), yet 58% of all people incarcerated in the United States (36% African American, 22% Latino). Why is this so? Is it because African Americans and Latinos commit more crime? Is it because there is discrimination in policing and courts? Could both be true?

An enormous amount of evidence also points to huge disparities by race and ethnicity in juvenile justice practices, as well. For example, a report by The Sentencing Project (2008) shows that, while African Americans only comprise about 17% of juveniles in the US, they account for more than 45% of arrests of juveniles, almost one-third of referrals to juvenile courts, and more than 40% of waivers to adult court. And a report by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency found that residential placement is about four times higher for African Americans, three times higher for Native Americans, and two times higher for Latinos than for Whites, while racial and ethnic disparities in rates of imprisonment are even greater (Hartney & Vuong, 2009).

The problem has been around so long that it even has a term: **disproportionate minority contact**, a term that refers to the fact that people of color are more likely than Whites to come into contact with agencies of juvenile and criminal justice (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, 2012). In fact, reviews by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention show evidence that the problem has existed at least since 1989 (Hsia, Bridges, & McHale, 2004; Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2012).

Importantly, studies show that different levels of offending do *not* explain disproportionate minority confinement (Huizinga, Thornberry, Knight, Lovergrove, Loeber, Hill, & Farrington 2007). The significance of these data are explained by The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (2014), one of the most important civil rights organization in the US: “Racially skewed juvenile justice outcomes have dire implications, because the whole point of the juvenile justice system is to head off adult criminality.”

Race, Ethnicity, Crime, and Justice allows us to provide answers to questions related to why disparities exist in criminal and juvenile justice practices, using empirical data and published studies to inform our conclusions. The goal of the book is provide a thorough, yet brief, summary of what is known about relationships between race, ethnicity, crime, and the practice of justice.

The authors of the book provide exhaustive coverage of race and ethnicity as they pertain to delinquency and crime, and summarize the most recent studies on race and ethnicity and juvenile and criminal justice practices. This includes how race and ethnicity impact the law, policing, courts, and corrections (including a separate chapter on capital punishment). In the book, the reader learns that there are indeed serious problems in the United States of not only individual discrimination but also institutionalized discrimination; that is, biases against different racial and ethnic groups have become part of American institutions (including criminal law and the mainstream media). The final chapter not only summarizes the entire book, but also offers needed reforms to bring the realities of justice practice more in line with American ideals.

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