

White, Black, and Latino Homicide Rates: Why the Difference?

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The racial homicide differential in the United States is extraordinarily large, with minorities exhibiting much higher homicide rates than non-Latino whites. Several sociological explanations for crime suggest that if whites were subjected to the same structural pressures as minorities, white homicide rates would approach levels currently experienced among minorities. Based on 1990 data for 129 U.S. metropolitan areas, this study quantifies the extent to which differences in structural characteristics among the non-Latino white, non-Latino black, and Latino populations contribute to the homicide differential. The analysis reveals that all of the white-Latino homicide differential and about half of the white-black homicide gap could be reduced if the characteristics of minorities were improved to levels currently exhibited by whites.

Race and ethnicity continue to be among the most important predictors of homicide commission and victimization in the United States, an issue that receives great attention from the media and, over the past few years, from social scientists. Recent figures indicate that young African-American males have eight times the homicide victimization and offending rates of their white counterparts, and incarceration rates for violent offenses for the black population are about five times those of the white population (U.S. Department of Justice 1999). Latinos also have an elevated risk of involvement in violent crime compared to non-Latino whites, although levels among this group don't approach the high rates experienced by black Americans. Despite the fact that rates of violent crime declined during the 1990s, mortality from homicide among minority groups is still extraordinarily high. Homicide remains the leading cause of death for black males between the ages of 15 and 24 and the second leading cause of death for Latino males in the same age group.

When attempting to explain this racial homicide differential, many sociologists point to the fact that minorities, particularly blacks, are more likely than whites to be poor and unemployed, to grow up in single-parent homes, and to live in segregated, poor, crime-ridden neighborhoods (Sampson and Wilson 1995). Empirical studies clearly demonstrate that these structural characteristics contribute to higher homicide rates across cities and metropolitan areas of the United States (Blau and Blau 1982; Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990; Sampson 1985, 1987). Not only do structural characteristics predict overall levels of homicide, they also are important predictors of homicide rates disaggregated by race (Martinez 1996; Peterson and Krivo 1993; Phillips 1997). Both white and black homicide offending and victimization rates are higher in places with relatively high levels of structural disadvantage and social disruption among the white and black population, respectively, although the relative importance of different structural characteristics appears to vary by racial group (Harer and Steffensmeier 1992; Messner and Golden 1992; Ousey 1999).

This research was supported in part by a grant from the Rutgers University Research Council. I thank Tim Bartlett, Lauren Krivo, Ramiro Martinez, Pat Roos, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. Direct all correspondence to: Julie A. Phillips, Department of Sociology, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research, 54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Piscataway, NJ 08854. E-mail: jphillips@sociology.rutgers.edu.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS, Vol. 49, No. 3, pages 349–374. ISSN: 0037-7791; online ISSN: 1533-8533

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The theory underlying the structural explanations for variation in homicide rates suggests that if white Americans were subjected to the same social pressures and structural disadvantages faced by minority populations, they would exhibit correspondingly high rates of homicide (Krivo and Peterson 2000; Sampson and Wilson 1995). Whites exhibit lower homicide rates than other racial groups because levels of structural disadvantage for whites generally do not approach the high levels found among minority populations. One recent study explicitly attempted to test this idea by examining the effect of structural disadvantage on homicide levels among black and white neighborhoods in Columbus, Ohio, which has a substantial number of predominantly white, high-poverty neighborhoods (Krivo and Peterson 1996). The authors concluded that racial differences in structural disadvantage do indeed account for a significant portion of the observed differences in violent crime in black and white neighborhoods.

This article extends the line of work examining the contribution of various structural characteristics in explaining racial differences in homicide levels by asking the following hypothetical question: How much would the racial homicide differential be reduced if blacks and Latinos had the same social and economic characteristics (composition), on average, as whites? Specifically, the present research advances the literature in the following ways. First, I use an Oaxaca decomposition technique to identify and *quantify* the sources of the racial homicide differential. In particular, the decomposition approach distinguishes between differences in composition as opposed to differences in the process of homicide in explaining the homicide gap between racial groups. This approach has been used by social scientists to identify the sources of the difference in the gender wage gap, commuting times by gender, and marriage rates by race (McLafferty and Preston 1996; Roos 1981; Schoen and Kluegel 1988; Wellington 1994), to name a few examples, but to date, has not been applied to the study of homicide. Second, rather than using information on one city as Krivo and Peterson (1996) do, I use 1990 Census data from 129 metropolitan areas to assess the contribution of various characteristics in explaining the homicide differential. Third, I conduct the analysis using *three* different racial and ethnic groups: non-Latino whites, non-Latino blacks, and Latinos. The inclusion of Latinos in the analysis is useful for several reasons. First, we know relatively little about the determinants of Latino homicide rates in comparison to those of other major racial and ethnic groups. Second, the theoretical arguments regarding the impact of structural factors on violence apply to all groups, and incorporating the Latino population provides an additional group with which to test the primary hypothesis. To the extent that this analysis can identify and quantify possible causes for the racial homicide differential, the study results should provide some guidance to public policy makers as to the most effective means to combat violence.

Theory and Evidence Regarding Explanations for the Racial Homicide Differential

Sociologists and criminologists propose a number of potential explanations for the differences in homicide rates observed across various sub populations. Many researchers believe that social pressures, such as unemployment, poverty, income inequality, substandard housing, and inferior education, disproportionately afflict minority populations and lead to greater levels of frustration and aggression (Harvey 1986; Hawkins 1986; Parker 1989). Others emphasize the dissolution of the two-parent family structure as a factor contributing to greater violence (Harvey 1986; Moynihan 1965; Sampson 1987). Family dissolution reduces both formal and informal social controls at the community level, which in turn may increase propensities for violence. Still others highlight cultural differences across demographic groups (Anderson 1994; Curtis 1975; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Cultural theories suggest that the historical experiences of some minority populations led these groups to adopt a value system that condones violence in certain situations. Due to the high levels of residential segregation and poor

neighborhood context, Latinos and, even more notably, blacks have adopted an aggressive stance, coined by Anderson (1994, 1999) as "the Code of the Street," to survive.

Although cultural and structural theories are often pitted against each other, Sampson and Wilson (1995) recently re-introduced an integrated theory of racial differences in crime, uniting elements of both perspectives (see also Harer and Steffensmeier 1992). Sampson and Wilson argue that structural and cultural factors do not operate in isolation from one another, but rather interact: If cultural influences exist, they tend to vary predictably with structural features of the urban milieu. Sampson and Wilson (1995) trace this notion to Kornhauser (1978), who observed that certain structural features of a community, such as poverty, heterogeneity, and instability, contribute to social isolation, reducing communication and the convergence of societal cultural values. Social isolation and residential segregation deprive residents not only of resources, but also of contact with groups of different class and racial backgrounds, particularly those representing mainstream society. As a result, conventional mores may not be so readily learned and adopted, and delinquent values may arise in their place.

Recent empirical and ethnographic studies clearly document the detrimental effects this lack of contact with mainstream individuals and social institutions has on members of segregated and poor communities. Massey and Denton (1993), in *American Apartheid*, argue that residential segregation results in the adoption by the underclass of behaviors and attitudes at odds with those of mainstream America, and that this is a primary reason for the perpetuation of poverty among blacks in the United States today. Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) demonstrate how social isolation and lack of mainstream cultural skills can adversely affect employment outcomes, while Cohen and Dawson (1993) show how living in a poor environment can lead to political and social disengagement. Anderson (1999), in his ethnographic study *Code of the Street*, traces the ways in which living in structurally disorganized communities is conducive to the adoption of cultural value systems and attitudes that seem to tolerate crime and deviance. All these studies indicate that societal cultural values become less relevant, or even unsustainable, in some community contexts, supporting theoretical conjectures.

Nothing within contemporary theories suggests that particular demographic groups are inherently more predisposed to violence. Rather, it is the experience of residing in structurally and culturally impoverished communities that may engender more delinquent or rebellious values and lead to higher levels of violence. Clearly, minorities in the United States are disproportionately exposed to such criminogenic structural conditions. For example, in 1990, non-Latino blacks, who represent 12% of the U.S. population, comprised 49.7% of the population of poor neighborhoods, in comparison to 23% for non-Latino whites and 24.3% for Latinos (Jargowsky 1997).

Empirical studies that examine the correlates of homicide disaggregated by race provide indirect support for the notion that the racial homicide differential can be attributed to differences in the structural characteristics of each population. Due to problems in obtaining adequate measures of cultural values, macro level work focuses on structural characteristics. Research shows that places with relatively high levels of structural disadvantage and social disruption among whites have higher white homicide rates (Harer and Steffensmeier 1992; LaFree and Drass 1996; Messner and Golden 1992; Parker and McCall 1999; Smith 1992). The same is true for blacks (Peterson and Krivo 1993; Phillips 1997; Sampson 1985, 1987; Sampson and Wilson 1995), suggesting that there is variation among blacks in homicide rates that corresponds to community context.

However, a number of recent studies, the vast majority of which compare black and white homicide rates, examine whether the determinants of homicide rates (the *process* of homicide) are invariant across racial groups and generally find that the particular sources of structural differentiation vary by race. This finding suggests a difference in the process of homicide variation by race. For example, Harer and Steffensmeier (1992) find that various economic inequality measures predict white violent crime well but are not powerful predictors of black

violent crime. LaFree, Drass, and O'Day (1992) discover that certain measures of opportunity, such as income and educational attainment, have the expected effects on white but not black crime rates. Messner and Sampson (1991) report differences in the effect of family structure, as measured by female-headed households, by race, with the effect much stronger for the white population.

Ousey (1999) directly tests the racial invariance assumption by comparing the correlates of black and white homicide rates across 125 cities in 1990 and found that the magnitude and significance of many coefficients vary according to race. Ousey discovered that the associations between homicide and various measures of socioeconomic deprivation, such as poverty, unemployment, and family structure, are stronger for whites than for blacks and concluded that the racial gap in homicide commission rates cannot be explained entirely by differences in the structural variables included in his analysis. Parker and McCall (1999) add a new dimension to the question of whether the racial invariance thesis is accurate by investigating whether structural conditions, such as racial competition, economic and labor market opportunity, and racial segregation, differ for distinct types of homicide offending (interracial versus intra-racial homicide incidents). They found significant differences in the effects of these structural conditions by type of homicide. In particular, racial inequality significantly increased the rate of black interracial homicide but not the rates of black or white intra-racial or white interracial homicide. Furthermore, cities characterized by higher resource deprivation and social isolation among the black population had higher black intra-racial homicide rates.

However, as noted by Sampson and Wilson (1995), meaningful comparisons are hindered by the fact that few whites live in environments as severely disadvantaged as many blacks, presenting a challenge to researchers studying this issue. Krivo and Peterson's 1996 study circumvents this problem by comparing black and white neighborhoods in Columbus, Ohio, which happens to have comparable numbers of socioeconomically disadvantaged blacks and whites. Their study found support for the racial invariance thesis, with the analysis demonstrating that racial differences in structural disadvantage accounted for a substantial portion of the observed differences in violent crime rates in black and white neighborhoods. Another comparative analysis of U.S. cities by the same authors (Krivo and Peterson 2000) provides further support for these ideas by demonstrating that when blacks and whites have similar low levels of concentrated disadvantage, the effects of factors such as disadvantage and homeownership on homicide rates are similar.

Recent empirical research gives us some idea of the contribution of factors related to composition and to process in explaining the racial homicide differential, generally through comparisons of the magnitude and significance of parameters included in equations of homicide rates for blacks and whites. However, to date, no research attempts to quantify explicitly the amount of the differential that can be explained by such parameters. In this analysis, I expand previous research in this area by using national data and by comparing three, rather than the standard two, race/ethnic groups. I first examine how different structural, cultural and contextual characteristics (composition) are associated with homicide rates for the three-race/ethnic groups. I then apply an Oaxaca decomposition approach to determine how much of the homicide differential between groups is attributable to differences in composition (that is, different *levels* of characteristics across race/ethnic group), and how much is due to differences in process (different *effects* of characteristics on homicide rates across race/ethnic group). This decomposition technique enables me to quantify the amount by which various racial homicide differentials would be reduced if blacks and Latinos were exposed to the same set of compositional characteristics as whites.

I next describe in detail the data and methodological approach adopted in this analysis. I then present the regression models of homicide rates on a number of metropolitan area characteristics to identify differences in the magnitude and significance of effects of key factors on homicide rates. Finally, I use the coefficients estimated from the separate homicide equations in the decomposition technique to quantify the sources of the differentials.

Methodological Approach

Data

To isolate the factors that contribute to the racial homicide differentials in the United States, I examine characteristics of the non-Latino white, non-Latino black, and Latino populations (hereafter called whites, blacks, and Latinos, respectively) across metropolitan standard areas (MSAs) using 1990 Census and 1990–1991 National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) data. I use primary metropolitan areas (PMSAs) for those metropolitan areas that are part of a consolidated metropolitan area (CMSA). Despite some arguments that neighborhood-level analysis may be more meaningful, I conduct this study at the MSA/PMSA level to maximize the representation of minority populations. For example, some metropolitan areas with large black populations contain many African-Americans who live outside the central city (e.g., Los Angeles), and these individuals would be excluded from analyses conducted at the central-city level only (Phillips 1997).

As homicide information is not provided for areas with populations of less than 100,000 by the NCHS, I include only MSA/PMSAs with populations at or above this cutoff. Due to the use of small sample sizes for the minority populations in calculating certain explanatory variables, I also drop MSA/PMSAs with either a black or Latino population of fewer than 5,000 from the analysis. For those MSA/PMSAs with variables obtained from the Census Bureau PUMS sample of 1%, I employ a minimum minority population of 10,000. These parameters yield a sample consisting of 129 general metropolitan areas.¹

The dependent variable is the homicide victimization rate for each racial/ethnic group for each metropolitan area in 1990 (See Table 1).² As we know homicide commission and victimization are heavily concentrated in the younger age ranges, the homicide rates are age-standardized to remove any biases that may emerge from differing age structures across MSA/PMSAs (see Phillips 1997 for a more detailed description). I obtain the numerator for these rates, the number of homicide deaths by race/ethnic group and MSA/PMSA of occurrence, from the NCHS, which produces micro level information (based on individual death certificates) on all deaths occurring in the United States. Recent attempts to assess the accuracy of race and ethnicity indicators on death certificates indicate a high degree of reliability (Riedel 1999). For example, Sorlie, Rogot, and Johnson (1992) found an underreporting of Latinos of only about 1% on death certificates compared with self-reports made to the Census Bureau. Furthermore, these researchers found, by comparing death certificates with current population surveys for race and ethnicity, a concordance rate above 95% for major racial and ethnic groups.³

The denominator for the standardized homicide rates, the total race/ethnic population by five-year age groups for each MSA/PMSA, comes from the Bureau of the Census (1990a). I inflate the 1990 population counts by race/ethnic group by the estimated total growth rates for MSA/PMSAs between April 1990 and January 1991, which are published in the *Current Population Reports* provided by the Census Bureau (U.S. Department of Commerce). I do not adjust the rates for the census undercount because adjustment factors are not available at the

1. As a result of these restrictions plus several others described later in this section, I dropped a total of 191 metropolitan areas from my sample.

2. Deaths from homicide for the years 1990 and 1991 were averaged to provide robust estimates and to reduce the impact of yearly fluctuations in homicides. It would be preferable to average homicide deaths for 1989, 1990, and 1991, but I cannot use 1989 data because the definition of many metropolitan areas changed between 1989 and 1990, making the two years incomparable. Homicides from legal intervention, defined as deaths caused by police officers' use of force in the line of duty, constitute about 1% of total homicides and were excluded from this analysis.

3. Riedel (1999) notes that two states, Oklahoma and New Hampshire, have not always identified ethnic origin on death certificates. For that reason, metropolitan areas in those states are excluded from this analysis.

metropolitan area level. The age-standardized homicide rate exhibits a positive skew and therefore, I take the square root of the homicide rate to normalize the distribution.⁴

The use of NCHS victimization data, rather than the Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) offending data, to obtain the dependent variable warrants a brief discussion. This analysis disaggregates homicide incidents by race and ethnicity, yet it is not possible to obtain reliable information on the number of offenders or arrests by race and ethnicity. Very few jurisdictions provide complete information on ethnicity—indeed, a recent BJS review revealed that jurisdictions in only 13 states included information on ethnicity, and even then, only in some cases—and, as a result, the FBI decided to phase information on ethnicity out of the SHR data set.⁵ However, for several reasons, I believe that victimization data provide an accurate assessment of the extent of homicide incidents by race and ethnicity, and theories of violence commission as well as victimization can be used to describe the selection of variables incorporated in the analysis. First, I use data on the metropolitan area of occurrence rather than of residence, implying that characteristics of the population of that metropolitan area can predict the level of victimization in that area. However, note that, regardless, the metropolitan area of occurrence and of residence is the same for the majority of homicide incidents (91% of incidents). Second, homicide incidents are overwhelmingly intra-racial, implying that the socioeconomic characteristics of victims and offenders are usually very similar. For example, in 1990, about 93% of African-American homicide victims were murdered by an African-American assailant, and 86% of white victims by white perpetrators (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1990). Finally, county-level analyses examining a thirty-year time period that use both total homicide offending and victimization rates as the outcome variable yield very similar results, suggesting that results are not sensitive to use of victimization versus offending data (Phillips 2000).

Three factors guide the selection of the independent variables incorporated in the analysis: 1) theoretical considerations, 2) prior studies of homicide variation (Blau and Blau 1982; Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990; Martinez 2000; Peterson and Krivo 1993; Phillips 1997), and 3) multicollinearity considerations. Standard tests, such as tolerances and unstable standard errors, indicate that the final set of variables included in this analysis is not highly correlated and therefore, multicollinearity is not a problem.⁶ No tolerances are less than 0.25, and the tolerances for virtually all the variables included in this study are greater than 0.4. Correlation matrices of the variables included in each racial homicide equation are included in the Appendix.

Table 1 displays the definition, source, and expected effect on homicide rates of the independent variables, which are race-specific unless otherwise noted, incorporated in this study. With limited exceptions, I expect the relationship between these explanatory variables and homicide rates to be equivalent across all racial/ethnic groups. I include a variety of structural variables in the analysis. I measure family structure by the percent of the population divorced or separated; social control theory, as well as numerous empirical studies, suggests an important association between family disruption and homicide rates (Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990; Sampson 1987). Absolute socioeconomic status is captured by two variables: the percent of families living below the poverty line and the percent of the population with a college education. Relative deprivation is measured by intra-group income inequality using a Gini coefficient.⁷ I also measure socioeconomic disadvantage with the percentage of males who are

4. Although it is more common to take the log of the dependent variable to reduce a positive skew in ecological studies of homicide, I found that the logarithmic transformation did not normalize distribution with these data. A square root transformation, another common technique to reduce positive skewness, did normalize the distribution.

5. This information was provided through personal communication with the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

6. The poverty rate is omitted from the final model for blacks, since it is highly correlated with the other socioeconomic variables included in the model. Coefficient and standard error estimates for this variable were unstable in the black case.

7. I also considered measures of interracial income inequality, such as the ratio of white to black median household income and ratio of white to Latino median household income. These measures were never significant and exhibited multicollinearity problems and therefore, are not in the final analysis.

Table 1 • Definitions and Sources of Variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Expected Sign of Coefficient</i>
Homicide			
Age-standardized homicide rate	Number of homicide deaths (1990–1991) per 100,000 population	NCHS/Census	
Family structure			
% divorced/separated	# divorced or separated (pop aged 15+)/total population aged 15+	Census-PUMS	+
Socioeconomic variables			
% families below poverty level	# families in poverty/total # of families	Census-PUMS	+
Intra-racial income inequality	Gini coefficient	Census-PUMS	+
% males unemployed	# males (aged 16+) unemployed/total male population aged 16+	Census-PUMS	+
% with college education	# (aged 25+) with college education/total population aged 25+	Census-PUMS	–
Industrial structure			
% employed in manufacturing	# employed in manufacturing/total in labor force	Census-PUMS	–
Stability			
Migration	# (aged 5+) living in different house/total population aged 5+	Census-PUMS	+
% foreign-born	# foreign-born/total population	Census-PUMS	+/- (Latino)
Culture			
State gun control laws*	Index (0–5 5 = most strict)	Kessinger	–
Black segregation*	Index of dissimilarity (blacks/whites)	Census	+
Latino segregation*	Index of dissimilarity (Latinos/whites)	Census	+
Region (1 = South)*	South, non-south		
Metropolitan context			
Population size (logged)*	Total population of metropolitan area	Census-STF	+
Multiethnic (1 = multiethnic)*	2+ minority groups larger than national share	Census-STF	+
% living in central city	# living in central city/total population in MSA/PMSA	Census-STF	+
% black*	# blacks/total population	Census-STF	+

Note:

All variables are race-specific except those flagged by an asterisk.

unemployed. Strain or blocked opportunity theory suggests that absolute and relative deprivation may lead to frustration that is ultimately manifested in aggressive behavior. I capture a metropolitan area's industrial structure by the percentage employed in manufacturing. Wilson (1987) argues that the decline in job opportunities in the manufacturing sector disproportionately hurt minority populations, particularly black men. I, therefore, include a measure of the extent of manufacturing jobs to test this assertion—metropolitan areas with more manufacturing employment should exhibit lower crime rates. While a negative relationship is expected for blacks, the impact of manufacturing employment on Latino levels of violence is more ambiguous. Moore and Pinderhughes (1993) note that Wilson's hypotheses applied to blacks living in the Rustbelt cities of the Midwest and Northeast, but because most Latinos live outside these areas, the same relationships may not apply. Although a similar 'Rustbelt in the Sunbelt' phenomenon occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there has been re-industrialization and the creation of new jobs in many of these cities, jobs filled primarily by immigrant, particularly Latino, labor (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993). As a result, it is possible that the extent of manufacturing employment may not depress levels of violence to the same degree for Latinos as for blacks.

To measure stability, I use two variables: one measures the percentage who reportedly lived in a different house in 1985, five years before the 1990 Census, and the second measures the percentage of the population that is foreign-born. These measures are incorporated to test social disorganization theory—that places with weak social integration and consensus on cultural norms may exhibit greater violence (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925; Shaw and McKay 1942). Although these stability measures are not standard variables included in many studies of homicide, recent research on Latino homicide (Martinez 1996, 2000) suggests that these measures are of particular theoretical importance to this sub-population, due to the high level of immigration experienced by this group. However, some suggest that, rather than having a positive effect on homicide rates, a larger foreign-born population among Latinos may actually depress violence levels. Although immigrants are more likely to be employed in marginal jobs and to be those most vulnerable to economic downturns, they also possess many positive attributes, such as a solid work ethic and strong social networks, that may contribute to less criminal activity (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993). All these variables are obtained from the 1990 Census Public Use 5% and 1% Micro Samples (PUMS).

I also include a series of contextual variables known to have an effect on homicide levels in the analysis. Although these variables are, with one exception, not race-specific and, therefore, their contribution to the racial homicide differentials cannot be measured, they represent important control variables. Demographic control variables include the population size of the metropolitan area, because most studies of homicide demonstrate that larger places exhibit higher levels of violence. This relationship is often attributed to the weak community ties and social organization that characterize large, crowded, and heterogeneous places (Simmel 1903; Toennies 1957; Wirth 1938). I incorporate the percent of the population that is black, another standard demographic control included in studies of homicide (e.g., Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990), as the black population is over-represented in homicide victimization and commission. I also include another measure of a metropolitan area's racial composition—whether or not a MSA/PMSA is multiethnic (see Frey and Farley 1996). Areas classified as multiethnic are those in which two or more of the three minority groups (Latinos, Asians, and blacks) comprise a larger share of the metropolitan area's population than that of the national population (these shares were 8.99%, 2.9% and 12.06%, respectively, in 1990). Finally, I include a control for the proportion of each population that lives in the central city of each MSA/PMSA as city homicide rates are generally considerably higher than those of the suburbs.

I include three additional control variables measuring facets of the metropolitan context that are believed to affect violence levels and that may reflect a place's cultural predisposition toward violent activity. To control for the spatial distribution of different ethnic and racial groups, I include two measures of residential segregation: a black and a Latino index of dis-

similarity measuring the spatial isolation of the black and Latino populations, respectively, from all other racial groups. Massey and Denton (1993), among others, argue that one way in which residential segregation contributes to violence is through the social and cultural isolation of certain minority groups that in turn contributes to the development of 'underclass' values.

I also include a measure of the relative severity of state gun control laws to determine the effect of gun presence on homicide rates within the three racial groups examined in this study. Guns are a quintessential symbol of a violent culture, and some argue that the U.S., compared to other developed nations and the Southern region, in comparison to other U.S. regions, exhibit higher rates of violence due to easier access to firearms. Five factors were considered in measuring the strictness of state gun control laws: whether there is an application and waiting period, whether a license or permit to purchase is required, whether registration is required, whether a record of the sale is sent to state or local government officials, and whether carrying a concealed weapon is prohibited. The variable ranges from 0 (least strict) to 5 (most strict); a MSA/PMSA in a state coded 0 is subject to none of these restrictions whereas a MSA/PMSA in a state coded 5 is subject to all of these restrictions. For virtually all states, the variable is constructed based on gun control laws in 1989–1990. Finally, I control for regional variation in homicide levels, with a dummy variable indicating southern location. This control variable also has a cultural interpretation—criminologists have long observed the high rates of violence in the southern United States, and some attribute this pattern to a "subculture of violence" that emerged from the legacy of slavery and the Civil War and that condones violence in certain situations (Gastil 1971; Hackney 1969).

Given Sampson and Wilson's (1995) observation that most sociologists overlook the role of cultural adaptation in explaining high homicide levels among certain racial groups, better measures of violent culture would clearly be race-specific. However, due to data constraints, the factors included in this study that may have a cultural interpretation are relevant only to the metropolitan area as a whole.⁸

Methods

This analysis involves a system of three regression equations, one each for the white, black, and Latino populations. As the regression equations for each racial subgroup are estimated from the same units (MSA/PMSAs), it is highly likely that certain common causes of homicide rates across all three demographic groups may be omitted from the equations. As a result, the disturbance terms from the three homicide equations may be correlated, and OLS parameter estimates inefficient. A Breusch-Pagan test reveals that the error terms are indeed correlated ($\chi^2 = 92.11$). To obtain more efficient parameter estimates, I adopt a Seemingly Unrelated Regression (SUR) approach, which uses a joint generalized least-squares method to take into account the cross-equation correlation among error terms (Greene 1996; Statistical Analysis System [SAS] Institute 1993). The coefficient estimates from the SUR estimates are interpreted in the same way as those obtained from an OLS model.

A comparison of the coefficients from these three race-specific models provides some indication of differences in process (effects of population characteristics on homicide rates)

8. I did consider several possible race-specific indicators, using information from the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR). Gangs and guns are often viewed as key symbols of a violent subculture (Anderson 1994; Short 1997), and the SHR contain information on the percentage of homicide incidents attributed to gang-related circumstances, which could be used as an indicator of the pervasiveness of gangs within different metropolitan areas and on the percentage of homicide incidents involving a firearm (by race of the offender), which could be included to measure the prevalence and use of guns across different racial groups. However, upon careful examination of these data, I decided that their quality were too poor to warrant inclusion in this data set. A substantial amount of the data is missing across the 1989–1991 period. For example, no police departments from Florida reported information to the SHR Program for the years 1989–1991, omitting a large number of Latinos.

between whites, blacks and Latinos in explaining the homicide differentials. More formally, I use an Oaxaca decomposition analysis to distinguish between differences in composition (levels of characteristics across the demographic groups) and differences in process in explaining the homicide differential among whites, blacks, and Latinos. Through the Oaxaca approach, I can decompose the difference between the homicide rates of any two racial groups in the following way (Althauser and Wigler 1972; Jones and Kelley 1984; Oaxaca 1973; Schoen and Kluegel 1988; Wellington 1994):

$$HR_1 - HR_2 = \beta_1(\chi_1 - \chi_2) + \chi_2(\beta_1 - \beta_2),$$

where HR is the mean homicide rate for groups 1 and 2, β is the vector of estimated coefficients including the intercept for groups 1 and 2, and χ is the vector of the means of the explanatory variables for the two groups. The first portion of the decomposition estimates the amount of the homicide gap attributable to differences between two groups in the means of the explanatory variables (composition), and is considered the explained portion of the homicide gap. The second part of the decomposition represents the amount of the homicide gap resulting from differences in the intercept and the effects (coefficients) of the explanatory variables (process) and is often referred to as the unexplained portion of the Oaxaca decomposition.⁹ If the effect of certain structural characteristics on homicide levels differs according to racial group, the homicide differential would not disappear completely simply by improving the circumstances of those groups subject to poorer structural conditions. However, note that this is not necessarily the case if there is an interaction between composition and process (that is, the effect of a compositional factor changes as its level changes) or if there are non-linear relationships between the dependent and independent variables.

Decomposition results are sensitive to the coefficients that are used to calculate the portion of the differential explained by differences in mean characteristics (Oaxaca 1973; Wellington 1994). In the example equation above, coefficients estimated from the equation for group 1 are employed to estimate the explained portion of the differential, but coefficients from the group 2 equation could easily be substituted. The standard approach or emphasis has typically been to use only the coefficients for the dominant group (e.g., whites/males), implicitly assuming that the process that describes the socially dominant group is 'normal' or optimal. Applied to this analysis, using the white coefficient estimates determines how much the racial homicide differential would be reduced if whites were subjected to the poor structural conditions currently faced by minorities.¹⁰ Alternatively, one can substitute white characteristics into the minority regression equations to answer a related, but different question: How much would the racial homicide differential be reduced if minorities were exposed to the improved conditions of whites, but the minority process of homicide victimization prevailed? In reality, it is likely that there is an interaction between composition and process—that is, as composition improves, the influence such factors exert on violence (process) may change. Indeed, Krivo and Peterson (2000) demonstrate that when African-Americans and whites have similarly low levels of concentrated disadvantage, the effects of disadvantage and homeownership on violence levels are fairly comparable, suggesting that the process of homicide variation does change as compositional factors change. For the purposes of this analysis, answers to both questions are useful and therefore, I present both sets of estimates, viewing the two estimates as upper and lower bounds of the amount of the differential that is explained by compositional differences.

9. Simple algebra shows that the difference in coefficients weighted by the means of group 2 (the unexplained portion of the Oaxaca decomposition) is equivalent to the difference in coefficients weighted by the means of group 1 and an interaction term (see Althauser and Wigler [1972] and Jones and Kelley [1984] for more detail).

10. This approach also answers another related hypothetical question: How much would the racial homicide differential be reduced if minorities continued to be subjected to the same poor structural conditions, but the effects of these characteristics on violence (process) operated as they do for whites?

Table 2 • Means and Standard Deviations for Variables by Race/Ethnicity

Variables	Means			Standard Deviations		
	Whites	Blacks	Latinos	Whites	Blacks	Latinos
Age-Standardized Homicide Rate(ASHR)	4.337	33.730	12.370	2.517	19.653	8.797
Square root of ASHR	1.993	5.526	3.263	0.605	1.794	1.317
Family structure						
% divorced/separated	10.514	17.085	11.822	2.010	2.620	2.923
Socioeconomic characteristics						
% families in poverty	3.586	17.318	16.401	1.457	6.055	7.543
Intra-racial income inequality	39.992	44.343	41.019	2.123	4.031	4.041
% with college education	23.764	12.023	11.612	7.022	4.382	7.429
% male unemployed	4.671	13.238	9.389	1.286	5.387	5.058
Industrial structure						
% employed in manufacturing	12.037	11.608	16.228	4.808	5.706	8.390
Stability						
Migration	47.860	54.986	61.581	8.357	9.973	9.494
% foreign-born	3.680	3.890	25.951	2.907	5.167	14.121
Culture						
State gun control laws	2.264	2.264	2.264	1.122	1.122	1.122
Black segregation	60.458	60.458	60.458	13.473	13.473	13.473
Latino segregation	42.209	42.209	42.209	12.625	12.625	12.625
South	0.333	0.333	0.333	0.473	0.473	0.473
Metropolitan context						
Population size (logged)	13.439	13.439	13.439	0.979	0.979	0.979
Multiethnic	0.248	0.248	0.248	0.434	0.434	0.434
% living in central city	34.965	65.565	53.130	22.119	24.308	24.181
Percent black	11.186	11.186	11.186	7.614	7.614	7.614

Results

Differences in Composition by Group

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the independent and dependent variables for the white, black, and Latino populations and reveals the large differences in composition of each group. The homicide rates in 1990 for each respective group highlight the striking differences in levels of violence. In 1990, the average black homicide rate was 33.7 per 100,000, a rate about eight times that of whites (4.3 per 100,000), and almost three times that of Latinos (12.4 per 100,000).

As expected, the descriptive statistics reveal that, among the three groups, the black population is most severely disadvantaged with respect to socioeconomic background. Measures of disadvantage in the areas of family structure, male unemployment, income distribution, poverty levels, and manufacturing employment are highest for blacks. In particular, note the high level of male unemployment among the black population, in comparison with the other two demographic groups: The percentage of black males unemployed is three times greater than that of the white population and one and a half times greater than that of the Latino population. As predicted, the table shows that the white population fares the best with regard to socioeconomic status measures whereas the Latino population usually lies somewhere between whites and blacks.

However, with regard to several structural measures, Latinos appear to be the most disadvantaged. A lower percentage of Latinos have a college education, presumably due to the large number of Latin American (particularly Mexican) migrants who comprise this group. The influence of heavy and recent immigration among Latinos is also clear in the stability measures. Both mobility, measured by the proportion who reported living in a different county in 1985, and the percentage of the population that is foreign-born are highest for the Latino population, at 61.6% and 25.9% respectively.

The level of residential segregation is high for the MSA/PMSAs included in this study, particularly for blacks. On average, 60.5% of the black population would have to move in order to achieve an even spatial distribution of blacks with respect to all other racial groups across the metropolitan areas. About a quarter of the MSA/PMSAs can be characterized as multiethnic, and one third are located in the southern region of the U.S. Blacks on average comprise about 11.2% of the total population of these general metropolitan areas, but are more likely to live in the central city of the MSA/PMSA (66% of blacks in this sample reside in the central city) than are Latinos (53%) or whites (35%).¹¹

Differences in Process by Group

I used Seemingly Unrelated Regression methods to estimate the parameter coefficients for each demographic group. A comparison of the regression coefficients across groups provides some indication of differences in process or in the effects of key explanatory factors on homicide rates. These coefficients are then used in the decomposition analysis to disentangle the effects of composition versus process differences.¹² The separate regression results are displayed in Table 3.

Several conclusions about the determinants of homicide levels across the three racial groups emerge from these results. First, structural characteristics, primarily family structure and socioeconomic factors, are important predictors of homicide rates among all racial groups although the particular characteristics of importance vary across groups. Second, characteristics of the metropolitan context, including those that may have a cultural interpretation, are not important predictors of homicide for whites and Latinos once other factors are controlled, but appear more important for blacks. Finally, as indicated by the R-squared statistics, the standard set of indicators included in models of homicide variation is more effective in explaining white homicide than in predicting rates of black or Latino homicide.^{13,14} Taken in sum, these results indicate that the determinants and process of violence across the three groups are somewhat distinct.

One conclusion to be drawn from these equations is that socioeconomic and family characteristics appear to have an important effect on homicide rates among all three racial groups, although the particular characteristics of importance vary across the sub-populations. While the entire set of factors examined explain more of the variation in white homicide rates than

11. A comparison of means weighted by the size of the population for each racial group reveals some differences in the average metropolitan context in which the different racial groups reside. Latinos, and to a lesser extent blacks, are more likely to live in a multiethnic metropolitan area than are whites. Blacks are also more heavily concentrated in the South. These figures provide further evidence that minorities are more likely to live in circumstances believed to be conducive to violence.

12. As noted in the methods section of the paper, the different effects of variables on homicide rates across racial group explain why decomposition results vary depending on which set of coefficients is used. To understand better the decomposition results, it is essential to review the different coefficient estimates obtained from the race-specific regression models.

13. I also report the R^2 statistic from the OLS regression equations for the white, black and Latino populations as the R^2 statistics from the SUR equation are not particularly meaningful and are a combined estimate.

14. This result is consistent with other comparative studies of homicide by race (Ousey 1999; Shihadeh and Ousey 1996; Smith 1992).

Table 3 • Seemingly-Unrelated Regression Coefficient Estimates by Race/Ethnic Group

<i>Variable</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>
Family structure			
% divorced/separated	0.065* (0.026)	0.006 (0.046)	-0.013 (0.037)
Socioeconomic characteristics			
% families in poverty	0.030 (0.040)		0.073* (0.021)
Intra-racial income inequality	0.039+ (0.022)	0.117* (0.039)	-0.018 (0.029)
% with college education	-0.024* (0.007)	-0.080* (0.031)	-0.041* (0.017)
% males unemployed	0.021 (0.035)	0.054* (0.027)	0.001 (0.020)
Industrial structure			
% employed in manufacturing	0.012 (0.010)	0.016 (0.024)	-0.015 (0.014)
Stability			
Migration	0.022* (0.007)	0.021 (0.016)	-0.008 (0.011)
% foreign-born	0.030+ (0.017)	-0.008 (0.024)	-0.007 (0.009)
Culture			
State gun control laws	-0.035 (0.047)	0.008 (0.154)	0.072 (0.119)
Black segregation	-0.003 (0.004)	0.001 (0.014)	0.000 (0.009)
Latino segregation	0.004 (0.004)	-0.014 (0.012)	-0.010 (0.012)
South	0.164 (0.133)	0.877* (0.421)	0.148 (0.334)
Metropolitan context			
Population size (logged)	0.072 (0.051)	0.916* (0.176)	0.649* (0.126)
Multiethnic	0.143 (0.111)	0.344 (0.318)	0.302 (0.288)
% living in central city	0.001 (0.002)	0.011* (0.005)	0.006 (0.005)
Percent black	0.024* (0.006)	-0.001 (0.022)	0.020 (0.016)
Intercept	-2.439 (1.049)	-13.718 (2.966)	-4.790 (1.897)
Pseudo R squared	0.534	0.409	0.391
OLS R squared	0.544	0.425	0.398
Number of cases	129	129	129

Notes:

* $p < 0.05$ + $p < 0.10$

Standard errors are displayed in parentheses.

in minority homicide rates, the magnitude of most coefficient estimates tends to be larger for the minority populations than for the white population, suggestive of differences in process.¹⁵ For example, socioeconomic status, as measured by the proportion with a college education, is important in predicting homicide rates among all three racial groups, with the proportion of these populations with a college education exhibiting a significant inverse association with the homicide rate. However, college education has an impact on black homicide rates approximately three and two times as great as that exhibited among the white and Latino populations, respectively. Similarly, black male unemployment levels have a large and significant positive effect on black homicide rates in contrast to the other two groups. Given the concentration of the illegal drug trade in inner-city, predominantly black neighborhoods, one could hypothesize that, with much less access to legitimate jobs, black males in particular turned to drug trafficking, an inherently violent occupation, as an alternative way to make a living.

Unlike the majority of structural factors, those included to capture lack of community stability, measured by the percentage born outside the United States and level of mobility, have the largest, significant positive relationship with white homicide rates. For the Latino population, a larger relative size of the foreign-born population and higher levels of mobility are associated with slightly lower homicide rates, although these effects are small and insignificant. These results are consistent with results from other studies of Latinos (Martinez 1996, 2000) that failed to find a significant effect, and sometimes a negative association, between immigration and total Latino homicide rates. As mentioned earlier, this relationship is not entirely unexpected and may well be due to the characteristics of those who comprise the Latino foreign-born population.

The other general conclusion that can be drawn about differences in process across the three groups is that characteristics of the metropolitan context in which these groups reside appear to affect homicide levels more among blacks than the other groups. The contextual factors that are thought to pick up cultural differences across place, for example, the prevalence of guns and level of residential segregation, are not important predictors of homicide rates for any of the three racial groups.¹⁶ However, for the black population only, I do find support for the 'Southern culture of violence' hypothesis once structural characteristics are controlled. Different facets of the metropolitan context are important for each of the three groups. Population size has a large and significant positive effect on homicide rates for blacks as well as for Latinos, but not for whites. This difference is significant across the three equations ($F = 19.42$, $p < 0.001$). The absence of an effect of population size for whites could be related to the regions of the country in which metropolitan areas with large white populations are found. Metropolitan areas in the Northeast, a region that is typically more stable and affluent, tend to have large white populations, whereas those in the South, which may be characterized by a subculture of violence, typically have smaller white populations. In contrast to the effect of total population size, the relative size of the black population is important in predicting white homicide rates, but not minority homicide rates. However, once the proportion of the population that is black is controlled, additional ethnic diversity of a metropolitan area no longer affects homicide rates across any of the racial groups. Finally, for blacks, but

15. The finding of larger effects for minority populations is contrary to some other homicide studies that have disaggregated data by race: they have found larger effects for the white population (e.g., Krivo and Peterson 2000; Messner and Sampson 1991; Ousey 1999; Shihadeh and Ousey 1996). There are several possible explanations for these discrepancies. First, none of these other studies appear to have distinguished the white population by Latino ethnicity. Second, the discrepancy may be due to the different units of analysis utilized—the studies cited above all examined U.S. cities while this analysis adopts metropolitan areas as the unit of analysis. Other studies that have used more aggregated units of analysis have found that the effect of structural factors on white homicide rates is not always larger than that on black homicide rates (e.g., LaFree, Drass, and O'Day 1992). Finally, the conceptualization of the dependent variable employed here may account for some differences.

16. Residential segregation does not affect in any significant way homicide rates across the three populations. In many ways, residential segregation is a composite measure of social ills, such as high poverty, disrupted family structure, and high unemployment, which become concentrated in these socially isolated areas. Once these other attributes are specifically incorporated into the model, the extent of residential segregation is no longer significant.

not for the other two groups, the proportion of the population living in the central city of an MSA/PMSA is important in predicting homicide rates.

In sum, the SUR results suggest important differences in the determinants of homicide by race. Structural factors play a role in predicting white, black and Latino homicide rates, although the particular factors of greatest relevance differ across the three groups. While the standard set of variables included in these models explains just over half of the variation in white homicide, they explain less of the variation in black and Latino homicide rates, only about 40%. The variability in the size of the coefficients across the three race-specific equations is suggestive of differences in process in how these key factors are associated with homicide rates.

Oaxaca Decomposition

While the above results can inform us about the factors important in explaining violence among the different sub-populations, they do not allow for an assessment of the extent to which the racial homicide differential can be attributed to differences in compositional factors included in the model. I now apply the Oaxaca decomposition approach to quantify the contribution that differences in composition as opposed to differences in process make in explaining the racial homicide differential by decomposing the various differentials into the proportions explained (compositional differences) and unexplained (process differences).

The decomposition results are displayed in Table 4. For each variable, the percentage of the homicide differential that can be explained using both the white and minority coefficients for the decomposition is shown. This percentage is calculated by dividing the amount of the homicide differential explained by each variable (that is, multiplying the racial difference in means by the white or minority coefficient from Table 3) by the total homicide differential. I present the results on the percentages of the white-black and white-Latino homicide differentials that can be explained, as the white population represents the socially dominant group with the lowest homicide levels in the United States.

White-Black Homicide Differential. Using the white coefficients in the decomposition analysis, I estimate how much the white-black homicide differential would diminish if whites were exposed to the same structural conditions as blacks. My findings indicate that about 47% (1.65/3.53) of the white-black gap (column 1) would be eliminated if whites faced the type of disadvantage confronted by blacks. In other words, if the white population had the same mean characteristics as the black population, the square root of the white homicide rate would increase by 1.65 per 100,000.

This finding indicates that a substantial proportion of the differential is due to differences between the white and black populations in structural characteristics. Most of the 47% of the white-black homicide differential explained by differences in composition is attributable to differences in the family structure and socioeconomic characteristics of these populations (41.4%). Among the most important structural variables in explaining the gap is the extent of divorce, accounting for 12.1% of the gap. The level of poverty and college education are also important, explaining 11.5% and 8% of the gap, respectively. In contrast, measures of stability contribute little to explaining the homicide differential, a total of only 4.7% (see column 1).

Because nearly all the measures of metropolitan context and culture are not race-specific and, therefore, have the same mean for all racial groups, I cannot measure the contribution of these characteristics in explaining the homicide gap.¹⁷ However, the one measure of metropolitan context that is race-specific, the proportion living in the central city of the MSA/PMSA, explains very little of the homicide gap. If whites lived in the central city in the same propor-

17. For example, the measure of gun prevalence does not capture differential use of guns by race. However, note that the decomposition analysis that included a measure of gun use by race found that cultural factors explain very little of the homicide differential.

Table 4 • Oaxaca Decomposition Analysis Showing the Percent of the White-Black and White-Latino Homicide Differentials Explained by Differences in Unweighted Means for Independent Variables (Composition)

Variable	White-Black Differential		White-Latino Differential	
	1 White Slopes	2 Black Slopes	3 White Slopes	4 Latino Slopes
Family structure				
% divorced/separated	12.14%	1.05%	6.73%	-1.33%
Socioeconomic characteristics				
% families in poverty	11.53%	—	29.94%	73.86%
Intra-racial income inequality	4.81%	14.44%	3.16%	-1.46%
% with college education	7.95%	26.60%	22.90%	39.18%
% males unemployed	5.01%	13.03%	7.68%	0.33%
Industrial structure				
% employed in manufacturing	-0.14%	-0.19%	3.83%	-4.92%
Stability				
Migration	4.49%	4.28%	24.05%	-8.74%
% foreign-born	0.18%	-0.04%	52.45%	-11.87%
Culture				
State gun control laws	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Black segregation index	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Latino segregation index	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
South	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Metropolitan context				
Population size (logged)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Multiethnic	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
% living in central city	0.80%	9.91%	1.32%	8.86%
Percent black	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Total explained	1.652	2.440	1.931	1.193
	46.78%	69.07%	152.06%	93.92%
Racial homicide differential	3.533	3.533	1.270	1.270

Note:

The percent of the homicide differential that is accounted for by each variable is calculated by dividing the amount of the homicide differential explained by each variable (multiplying the racial difference in means times the white or minority SUR coefficient from Table 3) by the total homicide differential.

tion as blacks currently do, holding all else constant, the white homicide rate would increase by only 0.8%. In comparison to structural factors such as divorce and poverty levels, this indicator of metropolitan context explains very little of the differential.

The second set of estimates presented in Table 4 uses black slopes to determine the proportion of the white-black differential attributable to compositional differences (column 2). That is, this estimate identifies how much the homicide gap would be reduced if blacks were exposed to the 'better' structural characteristics of the white population, but to the same process of violence. As is true for the estimate presented using white slopes, a substantial proportion of the white-black homicide differential appears to be due to compositional differences. If blacks had the same advantageous compositional makeup as whites, the homicide differential would be reduced by 69.1% (2.440/3.533)—that is, the square root of the black homicide rate would be reduced by 2.440 per 100,000 (column 2).

Using black coefficients, I estimate that about 27% (column 2) of the gap alone could be reduced if the same proportion of blacks received a college education as do whites. Other socioeconomic characteristics are also important—if black income distribution were as equitable as that for whites and if black males were employed at the same rate as white males, the white-black gap would be further reduced by another 27%. Using black slopes, family structure is not as important as it is in the estimates using white slopes because divorce levels do not appear as an important predictor of homicide rates in the black homicide regression equation. Finally, I find that if the proportion of blacks living in the central city were reduced to that of whites, the white-black homicide gap would decrease by 9.91%, indicating that the different metropolitan contexts in which blacks and whites live plays a role in explaining the homicide gap.

The difference in the proportion explained, depending on whether white or black process is assumed, stems largely from the estimated coefficients for three variables: the percentage with a college education, the divorce level, and the percentage living in the central city. The level of education is inversely related to homicide rates in both the black and white equation, but the effect of education is over three times greater in the black equation. Although the level of divorce is positively related to homicide rates in both equations, its impact is more than ten times greater in the white equation. Residence in the central city of a metropolitan area has virtually no effect on white homicide rates, whereas it has a much larger significant, positive effect on black homicide rates. Other differences are also apparent. For example, while income distribution has a positive effect on both white and black homicide rates, for whites, the measure of income equality has a small association with homicide rates, whereas for blacks, income distribution has a larger impact on homicide levels.

White-Latino Homicide Differential. Using white coefficient estimates (presented in column 3), over 100% (1.931/1.270) of the white-Latino homicide gap can be explained by the factors included in this model, meaning that if whites were exposed to the same conditions as Latinos, the white homicide rate would actually exceed the current Latino homicide rate. In other words, if whites had the same set of characteristics Latinos exhibit, the white homicide rate would increase by 1.931 per 100,000. Compositional factors more than explain the current difference in levels of violence exhibited by the white and Latino populations.

The general conclusion reached above for the white-black gap, that structural factors are important in explaining the homicide differential, is also true for the white-Latino gap, although the particular characteristics of relevance differ. By far the most influential factor in explaining the white-Latino gap is the percentage foreign-born. The proportion born outside the U.S. has a significant positive effect on white homicide rates, and if whites had the same proportion foreign-born as the Latino population currently does, the white homicide rate would increase by 52.5%. Certain socioeconomic characteristics are also important in explaining the white-Latino gap, particularly the percentage of families living in poverty and the percentage with a college education, accounting for 29.9% and 22.9% of the gap, respectively. Little of the white-Latino gap can be explained by the one race-specific contextual factor, the proportion living in the central city, which accounts for only 1.3% of the total differential.

Using Latino slopes—answering the hypothetical question of what would happen if Latinos had the same compositional characteristics as whites—the white-Latino homicide differential would decrease by 93.92% (column 4). The vast majority of the white-Latino gap can be explained by two structural factors: the percentage of families in poverty and the percentage of Latinos with a college education. These two characteristics alone account for 113% of the white-Latino differential. In contrast to the estimates produced assuming white process, measures of stability are less important in explaining the differential because these characteristics exert very little influence on homicide rates in the Latino model. As is the case for the white-black gap when using the minority group slope estimates, the contextual factor does play a role. Almost 9% of the white-Latino homicide differential is due to the fact that Latinos are more likely to reside in the central cities of these metropolitan areas.

As was the case for the white-black differences in estimates produced from the two decompositions, most of the difference in estimates for the white-Latino gap is due primarily to two or three variables. The level of poverty has a positive association with both white and Latino homicide rates, but the effect is over twice as big for Latinos than for whites. Similarly, the effect of college education on homicide rates is almost twice as great for Latinos as it is for whites. However, stability measures exert a far greater positive effect on levels of violence for whites than they do for Latinos.

Conclusion

This study attempts to quantify the amount by which various racial homicide differentials could be reduced if the compositional characteristics of minority populations were improved to be commensurate with those that characterize the white population. The criminological theories dominant today suggest that most of the difference in homicide rates across racial groups is due to the vastly different socioeconomic conditions under which various demographic subgroups live. I use national level data to compare the determinants of homicide rates for non-Latino whites, non-Latino blacks, and Latinos in 1990 and Oaxaca decomposition techniques to assess the validity of these assertions.

Using guidelines suggested by criminological theory and empirical studies of homicide as well as statistical considerations, I selected a set of variables believed to best predict homicide rates. As expected, minorities tend to fare less well than do whites with respect to a number of these standard indicators of well-being. Furthermore, a comparison of the effects of these characteristics on homicide rates across racial group is suggestive of differences in process—that is, how these characteristics affect homicide rates within each group. The set of factors incorporated in this study appear to do a better job in explaining variation in white homicide than in minority homicide rates, but in general, the magnitude of the effects of these standard characteristics on homicide rates is greater for minority groups than for whites.

I then used these findings on differences in composition and process between racial groups in an Oaxaca decomposition approach, to identify and quantify the specific sources of the overall racial homicide differentials. In particular, the decomposition approach enabled me to isolate the contribution of composition as opposed to process in explaining the homicide gaps between whites and minority groups. Although the decomposition results vary depending on which set of coefficients are used and even though certainly not all of the homicide differential can be explained by the factors examined in this study, composition does explain a good proportion of the white-black homicide differential. The two sets of estimates can be viewed as more and less conservative indicators of the true contribution of composition to explaining the gap (Oaxaca 1973; Roos 1981). A simple average of the two estimates (following Oaxaca 1973) suggests that a little over half, 57.9%, of the white-black homicide differential can be explained by differences in composition. The remaining amount of the differential can be attributed to differences in process and to the interaction between composition and process. With regard to the white-Latino differential, an average of the two estimates indicates that the gap in homicide (123%) can more than be explained by differences in composition. This result suggests that if the Latino population were subject to the same set of structural characteristics as the white population, the Latino homicide rate would actually be lower than the current white rate.¹⁸

18. I also replicated the decomposition analysis using weighted means and weighted SUR coefficients (weighted by the respective race-specific total population sizes). The general conclusions from results using weighted means are similar to those using unweighted means. The average of the two estimates of the white-black and white-Latino homicide differentials explained are 56.6% and 68.6%, respectively, using weighted means and coefficients, compared to 57.9% and 122.9% using unweighted means and coefficients. In addition, the weighted and unweighted results are in general agreement as to the factors that contribute the most to explaining the homicide differentials. The weighted results indicate that structural factors are more important than cultural or contextual characteristics in explaining the homicide differentials.

These findings indicate that, for the case of Latinos, poor Latino outcomes in terms of structural factors can explain all of the white-Latino homicide differential, providing strong support for current criminological theories regarding why racial and ethnic differences in violence exist. In the case of blacks, however, compositional factors clearly play a role, but explain considerably less of the white-black homicide gap, suggesting that these theories do not apply as well to the black population as they do to other minority populations, such as Latinos. This finding raises important questions about our current theories and empirical models of race differences in violence. Although large numbers of Latinos and blacks live in extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods, I suspect that the current models of homicide variation may not completely capture the unique situation faced by black Americans in terms of racial discrimination. One hint of this extreme discrimination is found in the measure of residential segregation—black Americans are much more residentially isolated from other racial groups than are Latinos or other minorities (Massey and Denton 1993). As mentioned earlier, available ethnographic evidence suggests that this social and cultural isolation is the primary way by which alternative value systems and subcultures develop (e.g., Anderson 1999). This theoretical reasoning suggests that cultural explanations that are rooted in structural foundations are particularly relevant to blacks, and so I would speculate that a large amount of the unexplained black-white homicide differential is due to the interaction between structural and unmeasured cultural factors. While several proxies for culture are incorporated in this study, they are not race-specific and therefore may not serve as adequate measures. Future data-gathering efforts and ecological-level studies of homicide must attempt to find reliable race-specific measures of culture, such as gang membership or gun ownership, which would serve as a means to test these hypotheses.

The Oaxaca decomposition approach is useful in providing estimates of how much of a differential is explained (i.e., attributable to compositional differences). However, a possible weakness of this approach is its inability to distinguish within the unexplained portion of the gap, that which is due solely to process and that which is due to the interaction of composition and process (Oaxaca 1973). As mentioned above, it is likely that as structural, cultural and contextual factors improve, the ways in which homicide rates are affected by these factors may also adapt. Indeed, Krivo and Peterson (2000) provide support for the notion that the process surrounding criminal violence changes as social conditions change by demonstrating that, when blacks and whites exhibit similar low levels of disadvantage, the effects (or process) of structural factors on violence is similar. The findings presented here hold process fixed (either at white or minority levels), but it should be noted that changes in composition likely change process in ways that are not yet completely understood. Based on Krivo and Peterson's (2000) arguments, the decomposition findings using white coefficients may be viewed as the more reliable of the two presented here because the white model reflects the effects of these compositional factors on homicide levels at relatively low levels of disadvantage. That is, if compositional characteristics of minorities were improved to the current levels experienced by whites, the process of homicide victimization for minorities may begin to resemble more closely the white process of homicide.

Despite differences in the estimated amount by which differentials could be reduced for blacks and Latinos, it nonetheless remains clear from this study that a significant portion of the racial homicide differential could be reduced by improving socioeconomic conditions for both minority populations. This conclusion provides some promising policy options. For example, improving levels of education, lowering levels of poverty, and reducing the extent of male unemployment among minority populations might well have an impact on levels of violence and reduce the striking racial homicide differential that currently exists in the United States.

Appendix Table A1 • Correlation Matrix for Dependent and Independent Variables for White Population

	<i>Homicide Rate</i>	<i>Divorce</i>	<i>Poverty</i>	<i>Gini</i>	<i>College</i>	<i>Unemployment</i>	<i>Manufacturing</i>
Homicide rate	1.0000						
Divorce	0.4952	1.0000					
Poverty	0.3677	0.2484	1.0000				
Gini	0.3208	0.2265	0.2497	1.0000			
College	-0.2028	0.0359	-0.6159	0.0986	1.0000		
Unemployed	0.0637	0.1037	0.3786	0.3206	-0.3547	1.0000	
Manufacturing	-0.3161	-0.3958	-0.1506	-0.3914	-0.2088	0.1742	1.0000
Migration	0.3810	0.6617	0.1682	-0.0362	0.1453	-0.3440	-0.5334
Foreign-born	-0.0076	-0.0857	-0.4818	0.3584	0.4080	-0.0012	-0.0880
Black segregation	-0.1780	-0.3862	-0.2095	0.1291	-0.0449	0.2338	0.3050
Latino segregation	-0.1802	-0.3676	-0.3082	0.1233	0.1322	0.0946	0.2662
Gun control	-0.2800	-0.2805	-0.2466	-0.2727	0.0150	-0.0052	0.3595
Population size	0.0100	-0.0132	-0.4884	0.1403	0.4274	-0.0292	0.0307
Multiethnic	0.2413	0.3103	-0.1252	0.2861	0.2309	-0.0614	-0.1918
Central city	0.1321	0.3775	0.3141	0.2804	0.1009	0.1838	-0.2229
Percent black	0.2797	-0.1569	0.0964	0.0697	0.0079	-0.2254	-0.0967
South	0.4026	0.2184	0.3594	0.2351	-0.0754	-0.2217	-0.4189

Appendix Table A2 • Correlation Matrix for Dependent and Independent Variables for Black Population

	<i>Homicide Rate</i>	<i>Divorce</i>	<i>Poverty</i>	<i>Gini</i>	<i>College</i>	<i>Unemployment</i>	<i>Manufacturing</i>
Homicide rate	1.0000						
Divorce	0.3331	1.0000					
Poverty	0.2920	0.4006	1.0000				
Gini	0.4151	0.4019	0.7274	1.0000			
College	-0.1974	-0.1449	-0.5849	-0.3815	1.0000		
Unemployed	0.3864	0.3777	0.5963	0.6247	-0.3858	1.0000	
Manufacturing	-0.0327	-0.0036	0.1561	0.1362	-0.1582	0.3915	1.0000
Migration	-0.2140	-0.1229	-0.2694	-0.5952	0.3755	-0.4174	-0.1666
Foreign-born	-0.0929	-0.3034	-0.3685	-0.2540	0.3094	-0.1514	-0.0704
Black segregation	0.3499	0.1707	0.2826	0.5298	-0.1909	0.4986	0.1892
Latino segregation	0.0531	-0.0576	-0.0972	0.1332	0.0054	0.2247	0.2864
Gun control	-0.0503	-0.1214	-0.1785	-0.0162	0.1054	0.0816	0.2887
Population size	0.3038	0.0556	-0.2895	-0.0267	0.4547	-0.0419	-0.1414
Multiethnic	0.0410	0.0365	-0.2738	-0.1807	0.1362	-0.0749	-0.2006
Central city	0.2335	0.3728	0.3266	0.3641	-0.1579	0.4155	0.1609
Percent black	0.2270	-0.0429	0.2013	0.2320	-0.2075	0.0532	-0.0977
South	0.1208	-0.0443	0.2681	0.0875	-0.2352	-0.1667	-0.3332

<i>Migration</i>	<i>Foreign-Born</i>	<i>Black Segregation</i>	<i>Latino Segregation</i>	<i>Gun Control</i>	<i>Population Size</i>	<i>Multi-ethnic</i>	<i>Central City</i>	<i>Percent Black</i>	<i>South</i>
1.0000									
-0.2304	1.0000								
-0.5916	0.1853	1.0000							
-0.4887	0.3501	0.4031	1.0000						
-0.2572	0.2231	0.1711	0.1608	1.0000					
-0.1597	0.4695	0.3898	0.2213	0.1911	1.0000				
0.0913	0.5025	-0.0992	0.1397	0.2179	0.2152	1.0000			
0.2984	-0.1230	-0.2852	-0.0176	-0.2125	-0.2694	0.0175	1.0000		
-0.1138	0.0077	0.1952	-0.1155	-0.1169	0.1762	0.0449	-0.2220	1.0000	
0.3614	-0.2656	-0.1753	-0.2709	-0.6525	-0.2369	-0.1396	0.1179	0.4320	1.0000

<i>Migration</i>	<i>Foreign-Born</i>	<i>Black Segregation</i>	<i>Latino Segregation</i>	<i>Gun Control</i>	<i>Population Size</i>	<i>Multi-ethnic</i>	<i>Central City</i>	<i>Percent Black</i>	<i>South</i>
1.0000									
-0.0090	1.0000								
-0.5872	0.1120	1.0000							
-0.2546	0.2648	0.4031	1.0000						
-0.0662	-0.0481	0.1711	0.1608	1.0000					
-0.1211	0.3327	0.3898	0.2213	0.1911	1.0000				
0.0497	0.1208	-0.0992	0.1397	0.2179	0.2152	1.0000			
-0.0478	-0.2538	0.2752	0.2786	0.0111	-0.0542	-0.0705	1.0000		
-0.4799	-0.0761	0.1952	-0.1155	-0.1169	0.1762	0.0449	-0.1538	1.0000	
-0.0561	-0.0487	-0.1753	-0.2709	-0.6525	-0.2369	-0.1396	-0.1404	0.4320	1.0000

Appendix Table A3 • Correlation Matrix for Dependent and Independent Variables for Hispanic Population

	Homicide Rate	Divorce	Poverty	Gini	College	Unemployment	Manufacturing
Homicide rate	1.0000						
Divorce	0.0467	1.0000					
Poverty	0.3622	0.1980	1.0000				
Gini	0.1806	0.4971	0.4606	1.0000			
College	-0.3385	0.1386	-0.5513	0.0347	1.0000		
Unemployed	0.1601	0.1560	0.3799	0.2514	-0.1828	1.0000	
Manufacturing	-0.0043	0.1129	0.1756	0.0279	-0.2344	0.1533	1.0000
Migration	-0.2430	-0.0908	-0.1630	-0.1570	0.2805	-0.3967	-0.1562
Foreign-born	0.0024	-0.3828	-0.2741	-0.2827	-0.0243	-0.2199	0.0196
Black segregation	0.1721	0.2137	0.1233	0.3487	0.0431	0.1952	0.3197
Latino segregation	0.3318	0.1602	0.5788	0.3913	-0.3774	0.3032	0.4146
Gun control	-0.0143	0.0405	-0.2054	-0.0248	0.0037	0.1054	0.4047
Population size	0.2787	0.1058	-0.2596	0.1202	0.2922	-0.0276	0.0263
Multiethnic	0.2290	-0.1138	-0.0498	-0.1851	-0.2796	0.0080	-0.0502
Central city	0.1613	0.3601	0.4657	0.3339	-0.2176	0.2638	0.2381
Percent black	0.0677	-0.0983	-0.2228	0.0127	0.2199	-0.2920	-0.1674
South	-0.0065	-0.2769	0.0366	-0.0785	-0.0111	-0.3010	-0.4228

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Migration	Foreign-Born	Black Segregation	Latino Segregation	Gun Control	Population Size	Multi-ethnic	Central City	Percent Black	South
1.0000									
0.1560	1.0000								
-0.2657	0.0237	1.0000							
-0.2300	0.0448	0.4031	1.0000						
-0.1286	0.0757	0.1711	0.1608	1.0000					
-0.0678	0.3273	0.3898	0.2213	0.1911	1.0000				
-0.1286	0.5021	-0.0992	0.1397	0.2179	0.2152	1.0000			
-0.2340	-0.3000	0.0819	0.4496	-0.0298	-0.1258	-0.0406	1.0000		
0.0741	0.1101	0.1952	-0.1155	-0.1169	0.1762	0.0449	-0.1995	1.0000	
0.2190	0.1040	-0.1753	-0.2709	-0.6525	-0.2369	-0.1396	-0.1366	0.4320	1.0000

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