



Confronting the North's South: On Race and Violence in the United States

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Abstract

More than any other 'Northern' country, the United States is distinctive in the degree to which its social, economic, and cultural development has been entwined with the global South from the beginning; and we cannot adequately understand the state of crime and punishment in the US without taking that uniquely 'Southern' history into account. In this paper, I sketch some of the dimensions of one crucial reflection of that Southern legacy: the extraordinary racial disparities in the experience of violent death between African-Americans and Whites. These disparities contribute substantially to radically different patterns of life and death between the races, and constitute a genuine social and public health emergency. But their structural roots remain largely unaddressed; and in some respects, the prospects for seriously confronting these fundamental inequalities may be receding.

Keywords

African Americans; causes of death; homicide rates; racial disparities; violence.

Please cite this article as:

Currie E (2017) Confronting the North's South: On race and violence in the United States. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 6(1): 23-34. DOI: 10.5204/ijcjsd.v6i1.382.



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Introduction

The United States occupies a remarkable and complex place within the 'North/South' dichotomy. As one of the richer, and certainly most globally powerful, of the advanced industrial societies, it is undeniably part of the 'North'. And the reach of American economic (and cultural) influence arguably shapes the world social order more than any other 'Northern' country.

But the United States is also distinctive in the degree to which its development has been intricately entwined with the global 'South' from the beginning, in ways that are more intimate and fundamental than in other advanced industrial societies. As Kerry Carrington, Russell Hogg, and Maximo Sozzo (2016: 5) remind us, 'There is no global North that is not also the product of centuries-old interactions between regions and cultures spanning the globe'. But the American experience stands out. Many Northern countries developed colonial regimes: the United States incorporated a full-fledged plantation-based social order within its borders from the start, one that shared more in common with the slavery-based societies of the wider Caribbean-Latin American region than it did with the socio-economic systems of other Northern countries. Migration from colonies and former colonies has shaped the experience of crime and punishment significantly in most industrial societies of the North: in the United States, the most important colony was internal, and massive migration from that internal South to the country's North was one of the defining social dynamics of the last hundred years (Wilkerson 2011). We cannot begin to grasp either the nature or the origins of America's outsized problem of violent crime (or of punishment) without placing that 'Southern' legacy in the foreground. In a sense, it is the 'elephant in the room' in discussions of violence in America: a looming presence that everyone is aware of, but that is rarely confronted directly.

Both in its dimensions and in many of its central characteristics, the American problem of violent crime looks more like that of many Third World countries than that of other advanced industrial nations. In this paper, I explore some of those dimensions, focusing on the stunning disparities in levels of violent death and injury between African-American and white populations. I emphasize that this focus reflects only one facet of the 'Southern' effect on crime and punishment in the United States. The country shares with some others – notably Australia, New Zealand and Canada – a history of systematic and violent subordination of indigenous populations, and an ever-evolving pattern of migration from a wide variety of 'Southern' regions. It also, unlike most other 'Northern' countries, has a long and historically porous geographical border with a 'Southern' country: Mexico. Both of these realities, and others, help to shape the lineaments of crime and punishment in the United States. But here I narrow the lens to the present state of violence within African-American communities, in part because that is where the impact of America's unique 'Southern-ness' appears in its deadliest and most catastrophic form.

Let me acknowledge at the outset that some might find my characterization of this legacy as 'catastrophic' to be both somewhat overwrought and perhaps a little dangerous. The dominant view of the state of violent crime in the United States in the mass media, and even among many social scientists, has lately been a generally celebratory one. The 'story' about crime in America today is that we are experiencing 'historic lows' following the unprecedented 'crime drop' that began in the early 1990s. In contrast to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, 'crime in the streets' receded as a national political issue in the early years of the twenty-first century (cf. Currie 2010), only re-emerging, to some extent, in the Presidential contest of 2016. But though the dialing-down of overheated political rhetoric about crime is surely a welcome development, the recent national complacency about crime masks the continuing concentration of staggeringly high levels of death, injury and suffering in many African-American communities, and whitewashes stark racial disparities in the experience of violence. As I will show, these differences translate into radically divergent patterns of life and death between the races. Our tendency to gloss over these realities helps to render invisible a degree of collective trauma and needless suffering that represents not only a demonstrably avoidable injustice but also a violation of fundamental human rights.

Our tendency to accept those conditions as part of the normal backdrop of American life stands in sharp contrast to the widespread outrage that has erupted in recent years over a spate of police killings of black Americans, especially young African-American men. That outrage has galvanized serious protest across the country and sparked a movement built around the insistence that 'black lives matter'. Yet no such national movement has emerged in protest of the black lives lost to routine, non-official violence in neighborhoods throughout the United States.

But those two kinds of violence – the unjustified killings of black Americans by police and the tragic killings of black Americans mostly by each other – are two sides of the same coin. Both reflect the same underlying reality: the continuing state of marginalization and structural oppression faced by many black communities today, which is deeply rooted in the peculiarly 'Southern' character of American social and economic development. We find it easier to comprehend that connection when it comes to one side of the coin – the police killings – and therefore easier to condemn. We find it harder to make the connection between the long legacy of systematic racial oppression and high rates of violence within the black community. When the hand that holds the gun that kills a young black man belongs to a white police officer, it is easy to see the connection. When that hand belongs to another young black man, the connection is complex, often indirect, and consequently harder to grasp. And because we find it harder to make that connection we too often tend to accept the ongoing social disaster of violence in many black communities as simply part of the American landscape. Others of us may be troubled by it but – for reasons I will explore later – find it too perilous or too sensitive a subject to talk about honestly. But confronting this toxic legacy of America's hybrid history is essential if we want to put an end to a level of communal violence that has no counterpart anywhere else in the global North.

Violent death in black and white

Let me begin with some numbers.

Everyone knows that several countries in West Africa were recently struck by an epidemic of Ebola, one of the most frightening and deadliest of diseases; an epidemic that, unsurprisingly, drew an enormous amount of attention and concern around the world. And the world drew a deep collective breath of relief when the epidemic was officially declared to be over, or nearly over, in 2015. According to the World Health Organization, something over 11,000 people died in this epidemic in the hardest-hit countries: Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. That is a lot of people. It is also less than 18 months' worth of homicide deaths among African-Americans in the United States.

From the start of the twenty-first century up through the year 2014 – that is, in the first 15 years of the new century – almost 124,000 black Americans lost their lives to homicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016). That is a population the size of a substantial city, larger by several thousand than the total population of the city of Berkeley, California, where I live. If we go back just a little farther in time to look at the picture over the last 20 years, the numbers become even more astonishing. From 1995 through 2014, roughly 169,000 black Americans lost their lives to homicide. To put that very abstract number into some more tangible frame, imagine that we had lined up the entire population of a medium-sized city and mowed them down mercilessly, killing every man, woman, and child: that is the magnitude of the slow massacre of African-Americans in the past two decades. Keep in mind that those 20 years were years of generally *declining* crime in the United States; years when it has often been said that violent crime is not the problem it used to be.

The figure of about 124,000 deaths since the start of the twenty-first century translates into a homicide death *rate* for the African-American population as a whole of about 20 per 100,000 people. Again, that number, by itself, doesn't mean much – until we compare it with the rate for

whites. For white Americans – more precisely, for what our Census Bureau calls ‘white non-Hispanic’ Americans – the rate is about 2.7 per 100,000. That means that the overall homicide death rate for white Americans over the past decade and a half has averaged about one-seventh that of black Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016).

That disparity may seem shocking in itself. But it is only the tip of the iceberg. The connections between race and violence in America are sufficiently profound that they overturn some of our usual expectations about violence and whom it strikes most. One of those expectations has to do with gender; another has to do with age.

Consider gender first. It is a truism in criminology that homicide usually strikes men far more often than women, and that is particularly true in societies that, like the United States, have high rates of homicide overall. And when we look at how violent death has played out in recent years *within* different racial groups, that truism holds, up to a point. Among those 124,000 black Americans who died by homicide during this century so far, about 105,000 – 85 per cent – were male. But so strong is the effect of race that a black *woman* has more than half again the chance of dying by homicide as a white *man*. For younger black women, the situation is worse: at age 21 years, the homicide death rate for black women is double the rate for white men.

Now consider age. In the United States, as in most other societies that suffer high levels of violence, it is the young who suffer it the most. And again, that relationship holds true *within* every racial group in America. More than half of all homicide deaths among black men in America take place among those aged 18 to 30 years. The person with the greatest likelihood of dying by violence in the United States today is a 21 year old black man. Among whites, it is a 26 year old man. So age matters, and it matters a lot. But when we put age together with race, this usually very predictable relationship is disrupted.

First of all, even though it is young men who are most likely to die by violence, just how likely they are to die depends overwhelmingly on their race. In 2014, the homicide death rate among male African-American 21 year olds was roughly 83 per 100,000, which is a rate of violent death higher than that of any country in the world except Honduras. The rate for white, non-Hispanic 21 year olds was under five per 100,000 – roughly one-seventeenth the black rate. Not half the black rate: not one-fourth the black rate: *one-seventeenth* the black rate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016; United Nations 2014).

But it gets worse. As I said, the chance that a man will die of homicide generally declines with age. It starts to rise in the teens, peaks in the twenties for both races, and then begins a long slide downward as they go into middle age and beyond. But once again, race radically complicates the picture. And that trajectory can be seen, to be sure, within both races. An older black man is much less likely to be a homicide victim than a black youth in his twenties. But a *60 year old* black man remains more than twice as likely to suffer a violent death as a white man of 26 – less than half his age – the age of *highest* risk for white men in America.

What makes these disparities even more sobering is that the rates of violent death for *white* men in the United States are themselves quite high by comparison with those of men in other advanced industrial societies around the world. Put up against men in, say, Japan or Hong Kong or Germany, young white men in the United States constitute a distinctly vulnerable group. They are several times more likely to meet a violent death than men of all races together in many countries at comparable levels of economic development. So when we say that a young black man of 21 is 17 times more likely than his white counterpart to be murdered, we are comparing him with people whose risk of being murdered is itself unusually high in the developed world.

And, to add to the mix, the numbers I have outlined so far are averages, for the United States as a whole. In many American states, the presence of violent death looms especially large.

In the state of Illinois, the homicide death rate for black males aged 15 to 29 was 132 per 100,000 in 2014. In Missouri, it was 142 per 100,000. Those numbers, again, may sound technical and bloodless. But the take-away point is that homicide death rates that high are unknown anywhere on the planet outside of some of the most violent countries of the global South. You can find them in some parts of Central America. You can find them in some cities in Brazil. You can find them in some places in South Africa. You will not find them in any other advanced industrial society: not even close.

What this tells us is that the experience of violent death in the black community in the United States is very, very different from the experience among whites. That difference is not subtle, and it is not just a matter of degree. We are talking about a fundamental division that profoundly affects the quality of life that people of different races can enjoy. And, again, the difference does not only apply to young black men. We focus on them the most, not surprisingly, since their level of victimization is highest. But the special experience of violent death reaches out to affect groups we may not immediately think of as being uniquely vulnerable: black women as well as black men; older black men as well as younger black men.

We can see those divergent realities even more clearly if we look at the racial disparities in violent death through some other lenses.

For example, the huge differences I have described in homicide death rates mean that the ranking of *causes* of death between the two races looks remarkably different. People die, of course, for all kinds of reasons. But the way in which those reasons line up tells us a lot about the kinds of lives that different groups lead and the kinds of risks that they have to face routinely. Looking at the pattern of causes of death – what people most often die of – provides a sort of dark window on some very basic things about our society, and about the human meaning of racial inequality in particular.

In the United States, homicide becomes the *leading* cause of death for black males by age 15, and continues as their number one cause of death through age 35. In other words, during every one of those years from 15 to 35, the single thing black men are most likely to die of is violence. Homicide is *never* the leading cause of death for non-Hispanic white men at any age. It rises to fourth place for white males for a while during early childhood, and again at ages 15 to 24. On average, for white men of all ages, homicide ranks nineteenth among causes of death. Considerably fewer white men die of homicide than die, for example, from aortic aneurisms or benign cancers. For black men overall, it is fifth, exceeded only by heart disease, cancer, unintentional injuries, and stroke. And, again, it beats out *all* other causes of death for younger black men between ages 15 and 35 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016).

And when we say that homicide is the leading cause of death among those black young men, we are not saying that it edges out other causes: we are saying that it overwhelms them. At age 21, homicide accounts for almost half of all deaths among black men. More 21 year old black men die of homicide than die of the next 19 biggest causes of death *combined*. By contrast, just one in 24 white men that age dies of homicide. And once again, these racial disparities are so large and so pervasive that they bend the usual expectations about gender and homicide. Again, only about one in 24 white males who die at age 21 dies by violence, but almost one in five black *women* who die at that age suffer a violent death.

But even these numbers understate the impact of violent death in many black communities. One way to better appreciate that impact is to look at it through still another lens: what public health researchers call 'years of potential life lost', or YPLL. YPLL is a measure of how much premature death results from some particular cause. You choose an endpoint – say, age 65 years – and ask how many years are lost before that age from some given cause of death, or from all causes put together. So YPLL puts together two important factors: how widespread the cause of death is –

how many people die of it – and how old they are when they die. Putting the two together provides another, especially revealing window on how death plays out in different communities.

In the United States today, heart disease is the leading single *cause* of death: that is, ultimately, more people die of it than of any other cause. But it is not the leading cause of years of potential life lost, because people tend to die of heart disease at relatively older ages, thus losing fewer ‘potential’ years of life when they do die. Instead, the biggest culprit for YPLL is what public health statisticians call ‘unintentional injuries’, a broad category that includes accidents – notably motor vehicle accidents – and ‘poisoning’, which includes drug overdose deaths. And that is because those deaths typically happen earlier in life.

If I die at 63 of a heart attack, then I have lost two years of potential life before age 65. If I die at age 15 years in a car accident, I have lost 50 years of potential life. And that explains why, for the population as a whole, unintentional injuries are the biggest single source of years of potential life lost before age 65.

And this measure becomes very important in understanding the social and personal burden of violence in the United States because, like accidents, homicide strikes hardest at younger people. Again, the highest number of homicide deaths in the US is among people in their twenties. And because it hits people younger, the impact of homicide on YPLL is much greater than the simple numbers or rates of death by homicide – bad enough in themselves – would suggest. As I said, homicide is the seventeenth leading cause of death in the United States today. But it is the sixth biggest cause of years of life lost before age 65.

So how does this measure look when we compare whites and blacks in the United States?

For black men overall, homicide is the *leading* cause of years of life lost before age 65. For whites, it is ninth. One out of every six years of life that black men lose prematurely before age 65 is lost to violence. For white men, that figure is less than one in 50. During the twenty-first century, homicide has taken more years of life from African-American men than cancer, diabetes and stroke combined. The difference between black and white men in this respect is so great that, even though black men make up a far smaller proportion of the male population in the United States than white men do, they collectively lose far more years of life to homicide than white men. There are roughly five times as many white non-Hispanic men in the American population as black men. But black men as a group lose almost three times as many years of life to homicide as white men do (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016).

And once again, the racial effect on years of life lost bends the usual expectations about gender. As I have said, only about one in 50 years of life lost prematurely among white men is lost to violence. For black women, the proportion is just about double that: one in 25. Gender does indeed make a big difference, up to a point. Black women lose far fewer years of life to violence than black men do. But race upends the relationship. Measured this way – by how many years of their lives it steals – violence looms much larger in the lives of black women than in the lives of white men.

Let’s step back from the numbers and ask what all of this is telling us. The numbers are a cold and, in many ways, inadequate tool when we are trying to understand something as complex and humanly significant as the impact of violence on the lives of individuals and the fabric of communities. But what we are seeing here through the lens of YPLL is nothing less than the massive eradication of human potential: the elimination of human possibilities. It tells us something more than the simple fact that violent death strikes black Americans more often. It tells us that, because it strikes so disproportionately at the young, it erases a substantial part of the future of an entire community.

A neglected emergency

I believe that these numbers constitute the metrics of an ongoing national disaster. But, as I've said, that disaster and the deep racial divide in the very right to life that it represents remain, to a remarkable degree, mostly a taken-for-granted backdrop of American life.

If black Americans had the same risk of violent death as white Americans, we would have saved almost seven out of every eight black lives lost to homicide in 2014, or close to 7,000 people. Seen from the other direction, if white youth had the same risk of homicide as their black counterparts, there would have been roughly 13,000 white, non-Hispanic, young male homicide victims that year, instead of the 787 who actually died. I think I can guarantee you that if that many young white American men had been murdered, there would have been a huge outcry and a vocal demand that something be done. Yet the violent deaths of more than 80,000 young black men over the past 20 years brought no such outrage, much less an urgent and serious search for solutions.

Why not?

Part of the reason may be that, as I said at the start, it is genuinely harder for most people to grasp the connection between this kind of communal violence and the impact of generations of racial oppression. It is a complicated idea to grasp that those horrific levels of deadly violence are not just the result of bad choices by a handful of antisocial individuals; or of bad family upbringing or the noxious influence of violent movies or rap lyrics; or the leniency of the courts. It is harder to wrap our minds around the idea that these individual acts are the complex and often indirect result of large social forces that we often cannot see: the result of generations of blasted opportunities, of stunted chances, of bad alternatives, of shrunken possibilities for meaning as well as for work and a decent living. But those connections are very real. There is, of course, a unique story behind every one of those violent deaths. But those stories do not exist in a vacuum. They are set in particular social contexts. And those contexts are often quite predictable.

But another part of the reason why our society tends to accept high levels of violent death in the black community, I suspect, is less conceptual and more political. It is that the great majority of the people whose deaths are reflected in these statistics do not come from places with any significant political influence, visibility or resources. Outside of their own neighborhoods, they are literally not 'seen' in any meaningful sense. *Within* those neighborhoods, there *is* often outrage and anger over the losses they have had to live with for so long. Outside them, not so much.

The places that suffer the worst rates of violent death in America – as is true around the world – are by now depressingly predictable. They are invariably places that have been especially devastated by the harsh underside of America's partly 'Southern' pattern of development. The highest urban homicide rate in 2013 in the United States among cities of reasonable size was suffered by the city of Gary, Indiana, where the murder rate greatly exceeds that of Kingston, Jamaica, the most violent city in one of the world's most perennially violent countries. Gary is also a stunningly poor and heavily African-American city. Sixty per cent of its children are in poverty: it has recently averaged an official unemployment rate of just under 20 per cent – about four times the national average – which surely greatly underestimates the actual number of people without legitimate work. And it is 83 per cent black (United States Census Bureau 2016). A roughly similar picture holds for *all* the other major cities that consistently experience the highest homicide rates in America: cities like Newark, New Jersey; New Orleans, Louisiana; Baltimore, Maryland; St. Louis, Missouri; or Detroit, Michigan. Poor people in poor cities – just like poor people in poor countries – have very little voice and very little visibility. And so a lot of what happens in their lives – including the worst as well as the best – flies under the radar.

A recent survey of the neighborhood experiences of people of different races in Chicago, where homicides and gun violence generally are rising sharply as I write, drives this point home. Eighty-six per cent of blacks, versus 50 per cent of whites, said that it was 'very likely' or 'somewhat likely' that a young person in their neighborhood would be a victim of violent crime; and 81 per cent of blacks, versus 41 per cent of whites, believed that it was either 'very' or 'somewhat' likely that a young person in their neighborhood would go to jail (Davey and Russonello 2016). And the survey also highlights black residents' deep sense of political marginalization in the city: only 8 per cent believed that the city's mayor 'cared a lot' about people like them, while more than two-thirds believed that he cared either 'not much' or 'not at all'.

On another level, I think that, for a variety of reasons, it is often hard for people outside those communities to face up to these issues, even people who are generally concerned with social justice, and even people whose job it is to study violent crime. Part of the problem is that some people are paralyzed by the worry that, if we call attention to the scope of violent death in black communities, we will be 'pathologizing' those communities and feeding negative stereotypes about people of color; in particular, demonizing the young men who are both the most frequent perpetrators of violence and its most frequent victims. The concern is understandable: the negative stereotypes about blacks and crime in America (as in many other countries) are very real, and highlighting the troubles of those communities *without* simultaneously emphasizing their deeper structural roots is indeed both misleading and destructive. But so is ignoring tough but inescapable realities. You cannot do anything to alleviate a human tragedy if you are unwilling even to acknowledge that it exists. And in the absence of action based on being willing to look those realities in the face, people keep on dying. There is a racism of exaggeration, victim-blaming and malevolent stereotyping, but there is also a racism of silence and a racism of denial.

This look-the-other-way attitude, unfortunately, is disturbingly common among social scientists. Some of the people whose job it is to understand this problem actively deny that it exists. There has been a resurgence in the last few years, perhaps more in the United States than elsewhere, of a kind of scholarship and media commentary that downplays, or dismisses, the significance of violence as a social problem, and sometimes suggests that the plague of violence in many African-American communities is largely a social construction (Murakawa 2014). Some of this scholarship has been fairly good at describing the racial inequalities in our criminal justice system, and that is certainly necessary and important. But in largely dismissing the idea that violence is a real problem in a country that loses roughly 8,000 African American lives to violence every year, this perspective comes perilously close to dismissing the people who suffer from it the most: perilously close to suggesting that in fact those lives *don't* matter.

One result of the failure to acknowledge this emergency is that our attention is shifted away from thinking about strategies that could confront head-on the historical and structural roots of endemic violence, toward relatively peripheral, if well-intentioned, responses. In the face of the recent highly visible police killings of black Americans, much of the discussion has focused on narrow issues of police reform: whether police should be required to wear body cameras more often; or take sensitivity training to become more aware of their implicit biases against people of color; or develop better internal mechanisms for disciplining officers who behave badly.

I am not suggesting that these measures might not be useful. But they are a long way from addressing the larger structural context of violent death in the black community. And if that is all we think about doing, we are not being serious. That lack of seriousness represents an abdication; a failure of the moral as well as the sociological imagination.

Confronting the 'Southern' legacy

If we really want to show that we believe black lives matter, we have to fold measures that are specifically aimed at changing police practices into a much wider strategy of tackling the sources

of black marginality in the United States. Yet to an important degree, the kind of structural and historical analysis that would make such a strategy possible has receded from the current discussion. The tendency to minimize these realities, or to accept them as a taken-for-granted part of the American landscape, obscures the depth and historical embeddedness of the forces that have created the 'Third World' levels of violence that continue to plague African-American communities in the age of the 'great American crime decline'. And it obscures the degree to which those forces are the product of specific choices: choices deliberately made or heedlessly not made; choices that could have been made differently; choices that, at best, have failed to address the special needs created by the legacy of our 'Southern' pattern of development and, at worst, have actively perpetuated that legacy.

I won't go into detail about those choices here, but the historical record is unambiguous. The context of post-Civil War communal violence in the black communities of the United States begins with the retreat of the federal government from its embryonic efforts at racially equitable economic development and land reform in the era of Reconstruction. That enormously fateful choice left Southern blacks landless and without stable sources of livelihood, and rendered them dependent on the shifting labor needs of white employers, who rapidly restored a system of labor discipline and social subordination that was remarkably akin to pre-Civil War slavery (Foner 2015). That retrogression was enforced both through escalating private violence by whites and through the development of a criminal justice system geared explicitly toward mass intimidation and exploitation of the African-American population as a whole. That system notably included the practice of convict leasing, through which local authorities routinely rounded up tens of thousands of blacks on vagrancy charges and other minor and/or vaguely defined offenses and sold them to private employers to work off the resulting fines, a practice that, in turn, was passively enabled by the persistent hands-off response of federal authorities (Blackmon 2009; Litwack 1999).

The degree to which this decades-long pattern of systemic state and private violence is implicated in the current crisis of violent crime within black communities is rarely discussed by criminologists, but it had two major effects that have resonated to this day.¹ This specifically 'Southern' reign of public and private violence and repression was a central pillar of the successful social and economic subordination of African-Americans after the formal end of slavery, brutally enforcing harsh racial disparities in poverty and economic insecurity that, in the absence of national action on a scale sufficient to alter it, have been a defining feature of the African-American experience, North and South, ever since. At the same time, it arguably provided the template for the vast expansion of mass incarceration in America after the early 1970s, by modeling the deployment of the justice system as a key mechanism of control of entire populations rather than a response to individual criminality. As Douglas Blackmon (2009: 6) puts it in his stunning history of the 're-enslavement' of African Americans from the Civil War to World War II, it is essential to acknowledge the 'effects of cycle upon cycle of malevolent defeat, of the injury of seeing one generation rise above poverty only to be indignantly crushed, of the impact of repeating tsunamis of violence and obliterated opportunities on each new generation'.

'Southern' resistance also limited the beneficial impact of key progressive legislation in the 1930s that established much of America's still fairly rudimentary system of public social supports for working people and the deeply disadvantaged. The resistance of Southern employers kept most agricultural and domestic workers – categories that at the time included a majority of employed African-Americans – out of the Social Security program for retirees and the unemployment insurance system for the jobless for decades. Similar pressure helped to keep other public assistance benefits abysmally low, because of the fear that decent benefits would cause blacks to spurn work at rock-bottom wages (Brown 1999; Fox 2012), again helping to cement enduring racial differences in poverty and economic insecurity that continue to shape the conditions of life in black communities.

Still another crucial point of choice came at the end of World War II when, with the experience of the Great Depression still fresh, progressive legislators put forward a visionary proposal for full employment, which among other things committed the federal government to guaranteeing steady work to everyone who wanted a job (Currie 1976). That legislation faced fierce and largely successful resistance from employers and their representatives, including Southern congressmen whose constituents often relied on the presence of a large pool of precarious and intimidated black workers. Had the bill passed in anything like its original form, post-war economic development in the United States would have been radically transformed, as the gains from rapidly growing productivity would have been far more widely and equitably shared. Instead, the tacit encouragement of high levels of joblessness, coupled with the precarious condition of black workers in a harshly segregated job structure, ensured that even a period of post-war prosperity was marked by the growing economic marginalization of many black Americans, especially the young, and by the 'hardening' of a pattern of economic expendability and social abandonment.

All of these processes were compounded by a somewhat more subtle and broadly political effect of America's 'Southernness'. The relative weakness of organized labor in the United States is widely understood to be an important part of the explanation for the distinctive underdevelopment of 'social-democratic' policies in America versus most other advanced Northern countries. That difference affects nearly every aspect of American life, from the lack of accessible and affordable health care to elevated rates of child poverty and, not least, levels of violent crime. And though the sources of the relative weakness of the American labor movement are complex, one part of the explanation surely involves the historical ability of American employers and white elites generally to weaken class solidarity by pitting white workers against black, a practice that was a particularly prominent feature of the post-Civil War industrialization of the American South. This has meant that the kinds of deep structural measures that might have alleviated the marginalization and dispossession of black Americans – adequate income support, universal medical care, an inclusive housing policy, a commitment to full employment – perennially lacked a strong enough constituency to make real headway, even in relatively progressive periods in recent American history.

The trajectory of marginality and violence in African-American communities reflects a history of crucial opportunities not taken. Reversing that trajectory requires facing up to the magnitude of the consequences of this legacy, and advocating for social policies on the scale and depth that this history necessitates. Obviously, that is a formidable task and one that has been made more difficult by several adverse developments in the United States in recent years. One is the continuing shrinkage of opportunities for steady and sustaining work – the product of global wage competition, technological change, the ongoing decimation of public sector employment and, especially since the recession of the early twenty-first century, the reluctance of private employers to invest in job creation. Another is the devastating impact of mass incarceration – again, in a real sense a 'Southern' invention – which has compounded the problem of mass joblessness and sealed the economic redundancy of great numbers of black Americans. And a third is the startling rise of the political power of the extreme Right, which, not coincidentally, draws much of its greatest support from the regional heartland of the traditional South. It would be difficult to overstate how much the national shift to the Right has contributed to the continued precariousness of African-American lives, both by imposing harsh austerity measures on already reeling communities and, as importantly, by pushing crucially needed social and economic policies off the political agenda of both major political parties.

But there are also strongly positive developments in American political culture that could shift the political balance in ways that bode well for the prospects of finally challenging the deeply entrenched forces that contribute to endemic violence in black communities. There is a budding, if still fragmented, movement against the extremes of economic inequality and heedless austerity that we have encouraged in the twenty-first century. There is a growing and remarkably nonpartisan sentiment in favor of reining in the worst excesses of mass incarceration and racially

targeted policing. And there is a much broader willingness, especially among the young, to confront the meaning and consequences of the country's long legacy of racial oppression.

None of this makes the task easy, because there are equally powerful forces working to perpetuate the conditions that undermine opportunity, dignity and security in many black communities. I think we have to acknowledge the hard reality that, from the perspective of too many of the people now running the economy and the polity in the United States, black lives actually *don't* matter, at least, not *all* black lives, and not very much. They don't matter very much because from the standpoint of the imperatives of our heedless global economy they are relatively expendable. That is why, for example, we are quietly willing to tolerate levels of black youth joblessness that virtually guarantee that places like Gary or Baltimore or Detroit will continue to have the homicide numbers they do. If we want to enduringly end the routine and massive loss of black lives to violence – and for that matter to preventable diseases and substance abuse and all the other well-known and exhaustively catalogued destroyers of black lives – we will have to challenge those imperatives.

Whether we will rise to that challenge is, of course, an open question. The crisis of black economic exclusion and expendability is, after all, hardly a new problem.

More than a century ago the great African-American scholar and activist WEB DuBois (1967) wrote about crime and race in Philadelphia, the city where he conducted one of the first really wide-ranging empirical sociological studies ever done in the United States. DuBois fully acknowledged that the problem of crime in Philadelphia's black community was real and serious. But he also insisted that it was fixable, and that our failure to fix it when we had the resources to do so amounted to a historic default, one that we would be judged for in the future. He said:

Other centuries looking back upon the culture of the nineteenth would have a right to suppose that, if in a land of freemen, eight millions of human beings were found to be dying of disease, the nation would cry with one voice, 'heal them!' if they were staggering on in ignorance, it would cry, 'train them!' If they were harming themselves and others by crime, it would cry, 'guide them!'.

He went on to say that 'such cries are heard and have been heard in the land; but it was not one voice'. And 'its volume has ever been broken by counter-cries and echoes; "let them die!" "train them like slaves!" "let them stagger downward!"

DuBois wrote those words in 1899, and his point surely rings even more true more than one hundred years later. We now have far more resources at our disposal to train and to heal, and we have learned a lot more, since DuBois wrote, about what has gone wrong and what needs to be done. We can and do argue about specifics: about what kinds of social investments would give us the most return; about which toxic policies that now contribute to the ongoing social and economic impoverishment of black communities most need changing. But no one who has been paying attention can seriously claim that we don't broadly understand some things we can do that would make a very substantial difference in the prospects of those communities and hence in the level of violence, fear and grief that they now suffer.

DuBois put it this way back at the close of the nineteenth century: he acknowledged that the problems were 'difficult, extremely difficult'. But he insisted that 'they are such as the world has conquered before and can conquer again'. And taking them on was not just a matter of altruism, but a 'battle for humanity and human culture'. He said:

If in the heyday of the greatest of the world's civilizations, it is possible for one people ... [to] slowly murder [another] by economic and social exclusion until they disappear from the face of the earth – if the consummation of such a crime be

possible in the twentieth century, then our civilization is vain and the republic is a mockery and a farce. (DuBois 1967: 388)

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¹ The distinctive pattern of private and official violence in the American South also probably had a shaping influence on the overall American pattern of gun ownership and gun violence, which also sharply distinguishes the United States from other 'Northern' nations. That connection is sufficiently complex to require a treatment of its own.

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