



# Racial Inequality in Firearm Homicide Victimization—but not Other Types of US Violence

Alex R. Piquero<sup>1</sup>

Received: 1 December 2023 / Accepted: 1 December 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

## Abstract

**Research Question** Is violent crime victimization among US minority groups higher than for White Americans in general, or is there a distinct failure of equal protection by race with respect to firearm homicide?

**Data** This analysis examines per capita rates of violent victimization for Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites as reported in recent years in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), as well as the firearms homicide data collected from local and state death certificates by the US Center for Disease Control (CDC).

**Method** The analysis compares the extent of disparity between White and minority victimization rates for different kinds of violent crimes. The framework is to calculate the ratio of minority victimization rates to the White rates for the same offense categories.

**Findings** While there are very small differences in victimization rates by race/ethnicity for most types of violent crime, and while Whites report higher victimization rates than minorities do for some kinds of violent crimes, there is a massive ratio for rates of firearms homicides. Black Americans of all ages, for example, suffer firearm homicides at a rate that is 12 times higher per capita than for Whites. Hispanic Americans are twice as likely to be victimized by firearm homicide than Whites.

**Conclusions** Policing strategies often fail to distinguish different types of violence, even when discussing racial disparity in policing actions. The evidence of this report provides the most direct support for police increasing the precision of their focus on crime prevention efforts that can reduce homicide as the most important racial disparity in criminal victimization, and, in the US context, firearm homicide in particular.

**Keywords** Racial disparity · Firearm homicide · Violent crime rates · Victimization surveys · Policing violence

---

✉ Alex R. Piquero  
axp1954@miami.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology & Criminology, University of Miami, Coral Gables, USA

## Introduction

One of the most disturbing but consistent observations in criminology surrounds the higher arrest rate for minorities, especially Blacks, for serious offenses, which then leads, in part, to disproportionate minority confinement. Scholars have speculated extensively about the reasons for each of these disparities, including differential offending due to systemic/structural racism and concentrated poverty, as well as differential selection/enforcement by the criminal justice system (see review in National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023), or some combination thereof (Piquero, 2008). Yet, direct comparisons across race and ethnic groups in crime and victimization remain understudied.

This research gap could be due to data limitations associated with a lack of disaggregated data, as noted in a report to President Biden by an inter-agency working group co-chaired by the author (Criminal Justice Statistics Interagency Working Group of the Office of Science & Technology Council, 2023). The gap could also be due to the coding of various demographic groups in existing data collections (Piquero et al., 2014). Whatever the cause of the gap, the need for unpacking the racial and ethnic variability in crime and victimization is of great importance to theory and evidence-based policing.

To shed some light on this issue, this scientific communication examines recent trends in violent victimization across race and ethnicity using two different data sources. One is the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The other is the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) National Vital Statistics System (NVSS), which contains mortality data that is not contained in the NCVS data self-reported victimization data collection. Because the majority of homicides in the USA are committed with firearms (Abt, 2019; Cook & Ludwig, 2022), this is the type of homicide investigated herein. Data are presented from 2019 through 2021/2022, a time span selected because it provides information from the year prior to, and after, the twindemics of the killing of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic/lockdowns, which were met with increases in violence in many US cities (Piquero, 2021).

## Data

The NCVS provides data on self-reported violent victimization for the following crimes: rape/sexual assault, robbery, and assault (both aggravated and simple assault). It also provides both a total violent victimization rate as well as a total violence rate with simple assault excluded. Because the NCVS is a survey of living persons, homicide is not captured in the NCVS. One of the best attributes of the NCVS is that it also includes self-identified demographic information for the respondent. For present purposes, the focus will be on Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics. This decision was reached because low numbers that exist for other groups such as Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and others can generate very high and incomparable rate calculations and comparisons. Data for the current analysis

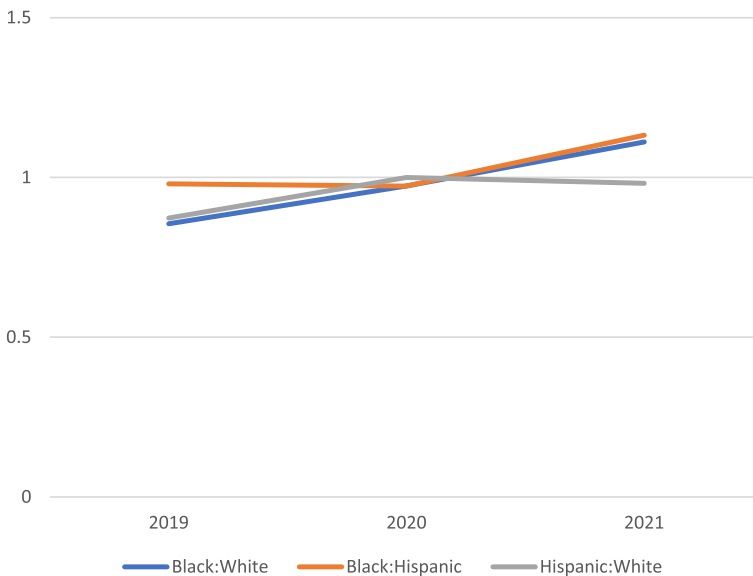
are drawn from Thompson and Tapp's (2023) NCVS report on violent victimization by race and ethnic origin.

The CDC data were drawn from a mortality report by Kegler et al. 2023 that contained demographic information on firearm homicide rates by race and ethnicity drawn from the CDC Wonder database. To match the demographic information contained in the NCVS, the focus will be on firearm homicide mortality for Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics and will exclude comparisons for other groups contained in the CDC data (e.g., Asian or Pacific Islander; American Indian or Alaska Native) due to low numbers as well as undercounts due to misclassification.

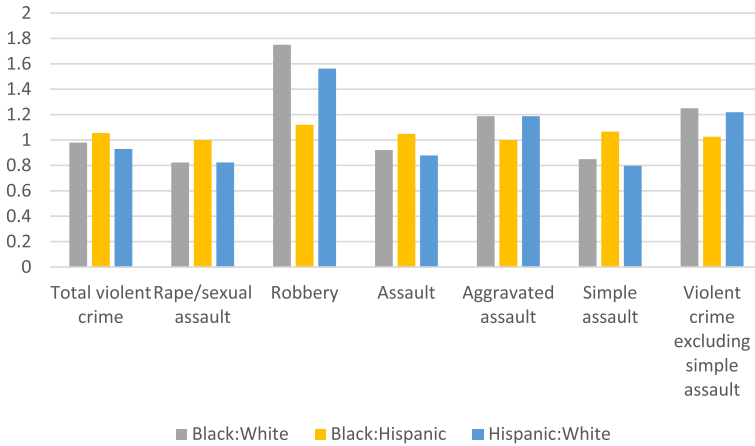
## Findings

Starting with self-reported victimization from the NCVS data, Fig. 1 shows that the total violent victimization rate ratios for the Black to White, Black-to-Hispanic, and Hispanic-to-White comparisons hover around 1:1, indicative of very few imbalances. It was only in 2021 that the Black to White (1.11) and Black to Hispanic (1.13) ratios were slightly greater than 1.0.

Next, Fig. 2 disaggregates the NCVS total victimization rate by crime type for the 2017–2021 time period and shows that for the majority of violent victimizations, the ratios between the race/ethnic groups once again hover around 1.0 or are slightly below 1.0. The one notable exception is for robbery, where the Black-to-White (1.75) and Hispanic-to-White (1.56) ratios are greater than 1.0, suggesting the rather low rate of robbery victimization among Whites.

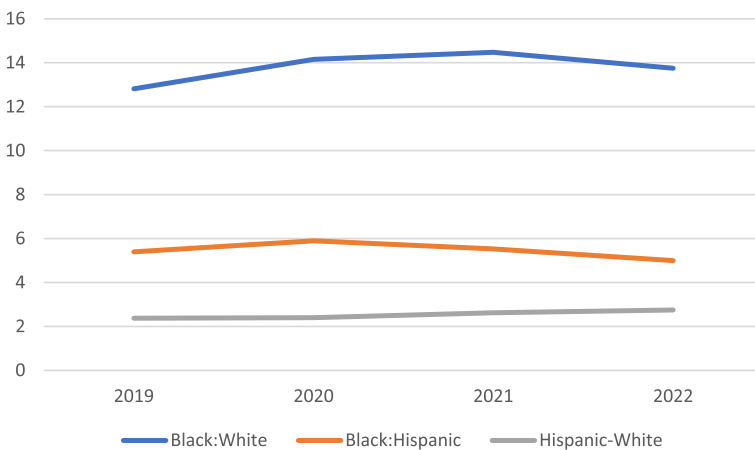


**Fig. 1** Race/ethnicity ratios for total violent victimization rate, 2019–2021 (obtained by taking the ratio of the violent victimization rate between each two-group comparison)



**Fig. 2** Race/ethnicity ratios for violent victimization rates by type of crime and victim race/ethnicity origin, 2017–2021 (obtained by taking the ratio of the violent victimization rate for each crime type between each two-group comparison)

Finally, the CDC firearm homicide data (Kegler et al., 2023) are displayed in Fig. 3. The results could not be more different than those from the NCVS data. Here, the Black-to-White ratios are always above 12.0 across 4 years. The Black-to-Hispanic ratios are near 6.0 for that time span reflecting that firearm homicides are experienced to a much greater extent among Blacks. This is exacerbated by the fact that the White firearm homicide annual rate ranges between 1.6 and 2.1 during the 2019–2022 time period.



**Fig. 3** Ratio of firearm homicide annual rate, 2019–2022 (obtained by taking the ratio of the firearm homicide annual rate between each two-group comparison)

## Conclusion

Violence has long been a serious problem in the USA. But firearm homicide is an epidemic. This study has shown that the epidemic afflicts certain demographic groups at alarming levels, with glaring disparities. More specifically, the current study showed that while violent victimization rates do not differ much across race and ethnicity, there are dramatic differences surrounding firearm homicides. Rates for Blacks compared to both Whites and Hispanics are exceptionally higher, a finding also observed in England and Wales using White-Black data (Kumar et al., 2020). In short, substantial racial inequality in the risks of being murdered by a firearm in the USA is staggering for Blacks. When this finding is coupled with recent work comparing the risk of firearm-related death and injury among males in certain cities having risks exceeding those of war for certain persons in certain areas (del Pozo et al., 2022), it is a stark reminder that firearm homicides are much more common in certain demographic groups.

The current US presidential administration has created the first-ever Office of Gun Violence Prevention whose task is to deal with this problem. As we await the work this office provides, it will need even more evidence on the kinds of approaches that can help prevent violent crime—and especially gun violence. In this regard, the evidence is clear that a mixture of policing and non-policing strategies is necessary (Council on Criminal Justice, 2022; John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, 2020). Supporting these efforts in a balanced way to communities and persons disproportionately affected by gun violence is critical to ensuring legitimacy in both policing and government services. And aside from the need for more research and policy-relevant work on firearm violence (IOM, 2013), there is also a pressing need to improve the country's data infrastructure regarding firearm violence (Barber et al., 2022; Roman, 2020).

Investing in both persons and places is a smart policy (Piquero, 2019; Sharkey, 2018; Webster, 2022) and has long-term benefits, as Cohen and Piquero (2009) showed for the savings of diverting a high-risk youth from a life of crime equaling several million dollars. Yet, addressing the sources of firearm, often retaliatory-based violence (Anderson, 1999; Hogan & Tuggle, 2021), and implementing efforts to curb it do not happen as quickly as updating one's phone software. It involves short-, medium-, and long-term efforts. After all, there is probably a 15-year-old youth somewhere in the USA who has a gun in their hand, and they may use it tonight to retaliate against someone due to an online beef or territorial dispute. Then, there is a 10-year who sees this sort of behavior in the street and thinks about how they would deal with such a situation in a few years' time. And then there is a 5-year-old who in 10 years may be in the position the 15-year-old teen is in today. The costs of not putting this front and center of government and criminal justice leaders cannot be overstated.

**Author contributions** ARP was responsible for all matters contained in this manuscript.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The author was appointed by President Biden to serve as the Director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, US Department of Justice, in June 2022, and served in that role through August 2023.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Abt, T. (2019). *Bleeding out: The devastating consequences of urban violence – and a bold new plan for peace in the streets*. Basic Books.
- Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Barber, C., Cook, P. J., & Parker, S. T. (2022). The emerging infrastructure of US firearms injury data. *Preventive Medicine*, 165(Part A), 107129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2022.107129>
- Cohen, M. A., & Piquero, A. R. (2009). New evidence on the monetary value of saving a high risk youth. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 25, 25–49.
- Cook, P.J., and Ludwig, J. (2022). Gun violence is the crime problem. *Vital City*. (1). <https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/gun-violence-is-the-crime-problem> (Accessed 30 Nov 2023).
- Council on Criminal Justice. (2022). *Saving lives: 10 essential actions cities can take to reduce violence now*. <https://counciloncj.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/VCWG-Final-Report.pdf> (Accessed 30 Nov 2023).
- Criminal Justice Statistics Interagency Working Group of the Office of Science and Technology Council. (2023). *Equity and Law Enforcement Data Collection, Use, and Transparency*. <https://www.Whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NSTC-Equity-and-Law-Enforcement-Data.pdf> (Accessed 30 Nov 2023).
- del Pozo, B., Knorre, A., Mello, M. J., & Chalfin, A. (2022). Comparing risks of firearm-related death and injury among young adult males in selected US cities with wartime service in Iraq and Afghanistan. *JAMA Network Open*, 5(12), e2248132. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.48132>
- Hogan, T., & Tuggle, G. (2021). Stop retaliatory homicides before they start. *City Journal* <https://www.city-journal.org/article/stop-retaliatory-homicides-before-they-start> (Accessed 30 Nov 2023).
- IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council). (2013). *Priorities for research to reduce the threat of firearm-related violence*. Washington: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/18319>
- John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence (Ed.). (2020). *Reducing violence without police: a review of research evidence*. Research and Evaluation Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York.
- Kegler, S. R., Turner, T. R., & Sumner, S. A. (2023). Notes from the field: firearm homicide rates, by race and ethnicity — United States, 2019–2022. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 72, 1149–1150. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7242a4>. Accessed 30 Nov 2023.
- Kumar, S., Sherman, L. W., & Strang, H. (2020). Racial disparities in homicide victimization rates: how to improve transparency by the Office of National Statistics in England and Wales. *Cambridge Journal of Evidence-Based Policing*, 4, 178–186.

- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2023). *Reducing racial inequality in crime and justice: science, practice, and policy*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26705>
- Piquero, A. R. (2008). Disproportionate minority confinement. *The Future of Children*, 18, 59–79.
- Piquero, A. R. (2019). Nothing fake here: the public criminology case for being smart on crime by being smarter on people. *Justice Evaluation Journal*, 2, 73–92.
- Piquero, A. R. (2021). The policy lessons learned from the criminal justice system response to COVID-19. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 20, 385–399.
- Piquero, A. R., Schubert, C. A., & Brame, R. (2014). Comparing official and self-report records of offending across gender and race/ethnicity in a longitudinal study of serious youthful offenders. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 51(4), 526–556. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427813520445>
- Roman, J.K. (2020). *A blueprint for a U.S. firearms data infrastructure*. NORC. [https://www.norc.org/content/dam/norc-org/pdfs/A%20Blueprint%20for%20a%20U.S.%20Firearms%20Data%20Infrastructure\\_NORC%20Expert%20Panel%20Final%20Report\\_October%202020.pdf](https://www.norc.org/content/dam/norc-org/pdfs/A%20Blueprint%20for%20a%20U.S.%20Firearms%20Data%20Infrastructure_NORC%20Expert%20Panel%20Final%20Report_October%202020.pdf) (Accessed 30 Nov 2023).
- Sharkey, P. (2018). *Uneasy peace: The great crime decline, the renewal of city life, and the next war on violence*. W.W. Norton.
- Thompson, A., and Tapp, S.N. (2023). Just the stats: violent victimization by race or Hispanic origin, 2008–2021. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/violent-victimization-race-or-Hispanic-origin-2008-2021> (Accessed 30 Nov 2023).
- Webster, D. W. (2022). Public health approaches to reducing community gun violence. *Daedalus*, 151(1), 38–48.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.