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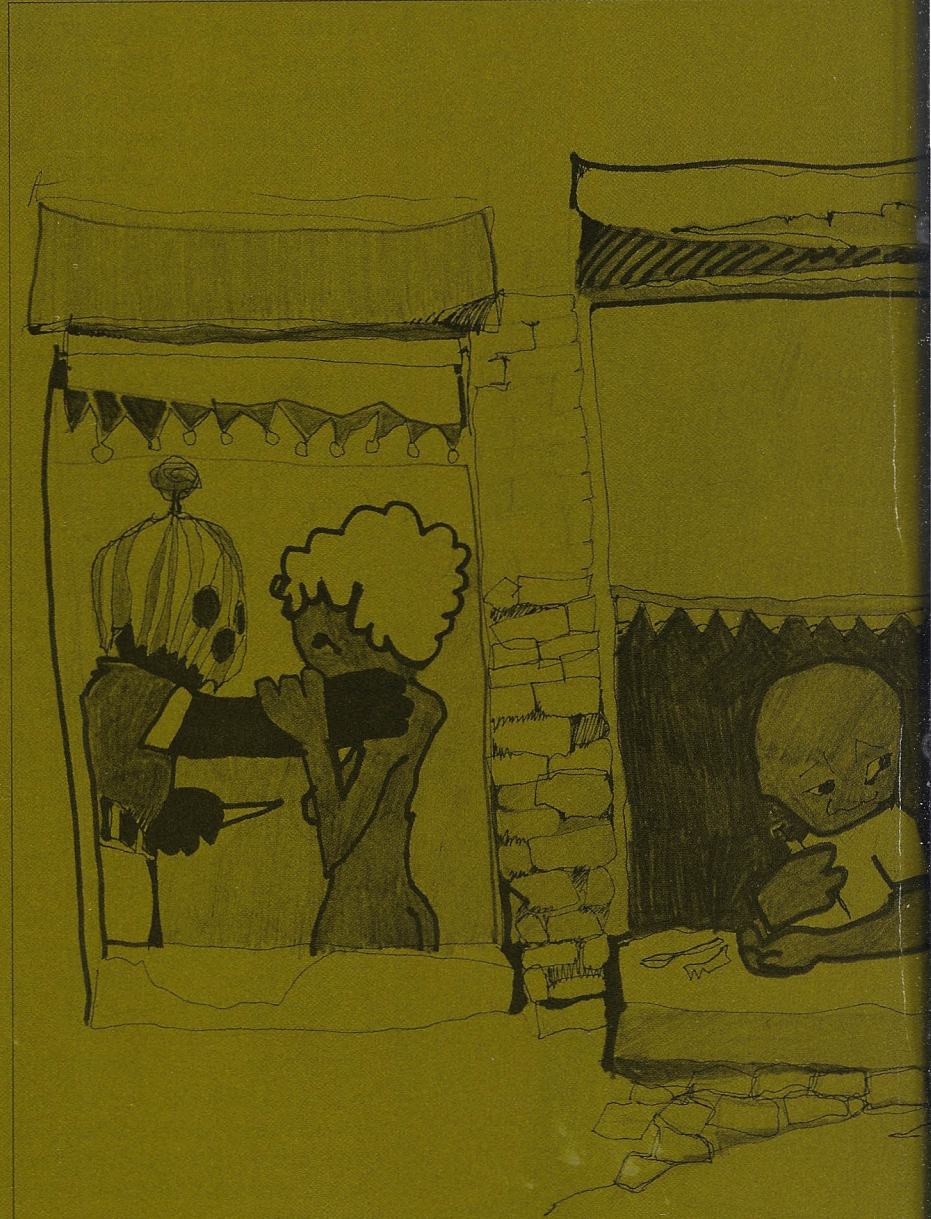
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Black On Black Crime

By Judith S. Andrews





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What do you say to an elderly woman whose purse has been snatched? How do you account for a drunken man who beats his wife who is in a wheelchair? Or the teacher who carries a weapon to school because of fear of assault by students; can you honestly admonish the teacher?

The answers to these questions and the theories about their causes are numerous. Most researchers quickly point out that society is at fault for the perpetuation among Blacks of self-hatred and frustration. Others stress the economic conditions of Black people and the dehumanizing effects of the capitalist system. Obviously, these explanations do little to alleviate the anguish of the swelling number of victims of Black-on-Black crime.

In the aftermath of the Watergate political scandal and the daily revelation of other "white-collar" crimes like price-fixing and tax evasion, many captious observers question the validity of discussing the violence Blacks perpetrate on each other. The argument runs like this: "Whites are ripping off this country for millions of dollars each day while we sit around and discuss stolen stereo equipment and color television sets." But human nature is such that the fear of stolen property and personal injury is more menacing to the average person than the fact that major business corporations made illegal contributions to the Nixon reelection campaign.

The dimensions of the problem of crime and violence in the Black community are complex, and unfortunately many solutions seem tenuous at best. Yet more and more Blacks are coming together to discuss the possibility of curbing the rate of crime among Blacks. One such gathering took place in June at Howard University under the auspices of the Institute for Urban Affairs and Research. The focus of the three-day conference was "Crime and Its Impact on the Black Community." More than 200 people from across the nation attended the sessions

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dealing with issues ranging from new policing techniques to the need for more positive self-awareness among Blacks.

No concrete answers resulted from the conference, but one did come away with the feeling that crime was an issue of tremendous urgency that was gnawing at the patience of those who suffer most from its grip. Facts and figures tend to substantiate the anxiety.

While recent FBI statistics show an overall national increase in serious crime of 17 percent, even more unsettling for Blacks is the rate at which young Black men die.

An article by Orde Coombs in the November 3, 1974 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* reports that in Michigan, "Between 1961 and 1971, the death rate from homicides among young Black men increased by more than 230 percent. In 1971, half of all deaths among Black men from ages 15 to 44 came about through accidents and murders. If this sad state continues in Michigan, 1 out of every 8 Black men will be murdered or die in an accident. While the current projection for white men is 1 in 17; for Black women, 1 in 26; and for white women, 1 in 30."

Recent studies have shown that the death rate for young Black males is not much better in other major urban centers. A report by the Chief Medical Examiner of the District of Columbia shows that during 1973 and 1974, the Black male of age 20 to 29 was most prone to be the victim of criminal homicide. In the District of Columbia, during 1973 and 1974, and in Atlanta and Miami during 1974, the frequency for Black male homicidal victims between ages 20 and 29 exceeded all other age categories for Black men and women and white men and women. Among the 299 autopsied homicidal deaths in D. C. in 1974, 255 were Black—203 Black males.

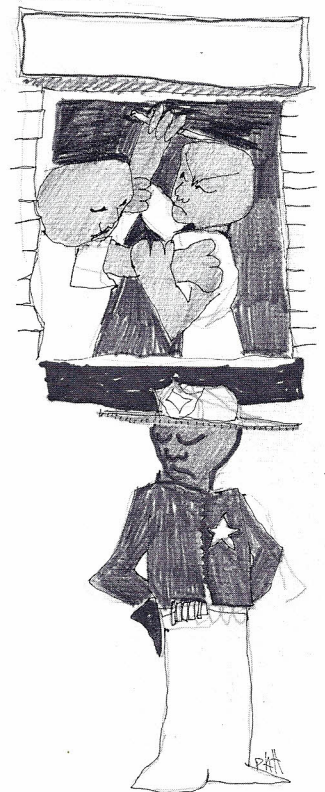
When confronted with these alarming statistics, it is readily assumed that these deaths are primarily drug-related or related to police brutality and violence.



researchers agree that drugs and the police are major death factors among young Blacks. However, there is another important factor that is overlooked, perhaps because it stares us all in the face—alcohol abuse.

According to Dr. Frederick Harper, former fellow at the National Center for Alcohol Education, "The D. C. Chief Medical Examiner's report said that alcohol is truly a catalyst for violence of all types . . . Significant intoxication at death exists in approximately 50 percent of adult victims of homicide and accidents and in some one-third of suicides. In addition, a substantial and probably similar percentage of intoxication exists among perpetrators of fatal violence."

Harper noted that of the 299 D. C. homicides for 1974, alcohol was diagnosed in the blood of 39 percent of those victims killed by firearms; 74 percent of those killed by stabbing; and 64 percent of those killed by blunt force.



"These statistics again are typical of other urban cities and they strongly indicate that alcohol is involved in over 50 percent of homicides in the cities and that the Black male is most likely to be the victim."

Alcohol abuse seems most pernicious in that homicides and assaults are too often brought home. Anxiety and anger are exacerbated to the point that one almost unconsciously strikes out at those closest in life, perhaps a family member. These so-called "crimes of passion" predominate in the Black community.

Elsie L. Scott of the New York Commission on Racial Justice and a participant at the Howard conference said: "You probably have more to fear by going home to your husband than you do from strangers in the street." She quoted from a study which said, "the risk of injury from a violent crime involving a stranger is about half as great as the risk of injury from a non-stranger violent crime."



Scott's research, like Harper's and others in the criminal justice field, is replete with data which prove or disprove some point or another. However, this reliance on statistics is perhaps one of the more perplexing ironies of crime research for Blacks. The problem simply put is this: Black researchers must satisfy a data-happy society by using figures to support their theories but at the same time they must often look askance at the very sources of the figures.

"The *FBI Uniform Crime Reports* serve as the foremost authority for police departments and many private citizens in spite of all the criticism that has been given of the reports," Scott said. "The crimes included in the reports are murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and auto theft . . . crimes usually associated with Black, poor and racial minority persons."

Several researchers at the conference <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612537508839025> time in their communities, particularly in

tioned because of the frequent misuse of data to support either the hiring of additional policemen or the acquisition of additional funds to support crime fighting.

As one example of this statistical abuse, Scott cited the case of the head of the New York Transit Police who was forced to resign after confessing that he ordered his subordinates to falsify reports to make his department look better.

The concern of Blacks over the abuses of statistics is not of recent vintage. In 1900 Blacks gathered at the Fourth Hampton Negro Conference to discuss the same question, according to Dr. Lenwood G. Davis, assistant professor of Black Studies at Ohio State University. He spoke of a speech given at that meeting by John Henry Smyth who was then superintendent of the Virginia Reformatory.

"The speaker (Smyth) made a significant observation when he stated that in the discussion of the criminality of the Negro too much importance was attached to mere statistics," he said.

"In any discussion of an ethical character mere statistics may not be relied upon," Dr. Davis said. He suggested that the only way to play the statistics game is for more Black researchers to compile their own data and delve more deeply for accurate interpretation of the facts compiled by others.

Even in 1900, Blacks were asking the same question that continually reared its head at Howard's 1975 Conference: "What is to be done?"

In Coomb's article, he phrased the question this way: "What can be done? How in this time of vaunted equality can the pathologies of the ghettos be lessened? How long will middle class Blacks and whites put up with being held captive in their cities: When will the vigilantism of "Death Wish," the current popular movie which stars Charles Bronson as a liberal-turned avenger, become an accepted part of our city-scape?"

Indeed, vigilantism is one of the many means Blacks have employed to fight

areas where police confidence is low. And in some cities, police have encouraged the organization of tenant patrols and block patrols. An innovative example of this is a community in New York where block residents carry whistles and blow them at the sight of any abnormal happenings on the streets. A visitor from Detroit—described as the "Murder Capital" of America—said it is not uncommon to see signs in some residential areas saying: "This Block Protected by Private Police."

Most of the conferees agreed that the least acceptable method of combatting crime in Black communities is the cry for more repressive police measures. This is left to the advocacy of the "law-and-order" types, both Black and white. The Black community has had its fill of police shooting down bicycle thieves and arbitrarily stopping Black men as robbery suspects. On the other hand, it seems that many Black residents are tired of sleepless nights and triple-locked doors. □