



Michael Light on Rates of Violence and the Consequences of Segregation

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Hosted by Dave Chancellor

Chancellor Hello, you're listening to the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor and this is our October 2018 podcast episode. For this month's podcast, we're going to be hearing from Michael Light, who is a sociologist and IRP affiliate here at UW-Madison. He's going to be talking about work he did with Julia Thomas that looks at whether whites benefit from segregation when it comes to violence. When we first started talking, I asked him about the basic context of segregation in the U.S. and how that matters when we're trying to understand its consequences.

Light There are two things that people tend to talk about in terms of segregation. There's a lot of research that suggests segregation has pretty harmful effects, particularly for African Americans, so if you look at research on poverty, research on urban sociology, research on crime, research on educational outcomes, segregation has been implicated across a whole swath of outcomes in terms of explaining why we see such dramatic racial differences in those outcomes and also how segregation affects—and again the focus tends to be on that it's harmful for African Americans. And then the other part that a lot of people talked is that since 1970, we've seen dramatic declines in segregation. We are far less segregated today than we were in the 60s and 70s. We've gone from what some have called the apex of American apartheid, a famous Massey and Denton book titled *American Apartheid* to what some have called the end of the segregated century, that we have the lowest level of segregation that we've seen since 1910.

Chancellor But Light says there's been surprisingly little work within sociology or criminology about the consequences of this increased integration.

Light We've spent a lot of time in demography noting these patterns and seeing that segregation has gone down or where has it gone down, or for which groups has it gone down? So there are a lot of studies looking at that particular issue and there are also a lot of studies looking at the causes of decreased segregation. So, for example, I can think of Krysan and Crowder's recent book, John Iceland's work, looking at why have we seen a decrease in black-white segregation, right? There's considerably less research looking at what are the consequences of this increase in black white integration? And we were somewhat surprised by that given the fact that segregation has been implicated for playing a major role in black white inequality, again across a host of outcomes. Now in our case, we look at violence as our outcome, specifically homicide, and that's for two reasons. One, because we're engaging a body of work that has also looked at homicide. So that's one reason. And the other reason is that homicide is one of the most manifest racial inequalities that we have. So if you compare racial differences in homicide to, say, racial differences in unemployment, right? The disparities are much larger when you look at violent crime. Although those disparities have gone down over the years. And so, that's the part of the motivating factor for why we wanted to look at homicide.

Chancellor In talking about the prior research that they're engaging with here, Professor Light says there are two

Chancellor, cont. main areas they're focused on.

Light The first body of work is a very general finding, and again there's a lot of consensus, that segregation harms African Americans, right? And you can look at this by different outcomes, but specifically if you look at crime and violent crime. We see that increased segregation leads to higher rates of black violence. Again, there's a pretty general consensus on this within the literature. One of the things that we engage in our paper is what are the consequences of segregation for groups other than African Americans? Specifically, we look at whites. And we do this because there are competing views on what the consequences of segregation are for whites. So, the two main bodies of work we look at are an article, I think it was in the *American Journal of Sociology*, I think it was in 2009 by Lauren Krivo, Peterson, and Kuhl. And what they argue is that segregation harms everybody. Segregation leads to worse outcomes for African Americans and it leads to worse outcomes for whites. They look at violent crime rates in segregated cities and the core of their argument is that segregation undermines social organization. It makes people insular and so they don't work together to tackle things like crime problems. And so what happens is that's a net negative for everybody is that segregation increases crime in black neighborhoods, but it also increases crime in white neighborhoods. So there we have this pretty strong directional hypothesis, that segregation should increase white rates of violence. And then you have this other body of work, specifically work by Douglas Massey, a sociologist at Princeton who doesn't pull any punches on this and makes it very clear. He says segregation persists because it benefits whites. The article that we really engage in this—both an article and a book chapter—and I believe the title is “Getting Away with Murder.” The core of his argument is that segregation concentrates poverty and a host of social problems among African Americans while simultaneously shielding whites. As I hope is pretty clear, these are competing hypotheses. They're mutually exclusive. They can't both be true. So, we have one body of work that says segregation should increase white rates of violence and another body of work that says segregation should decrease rates of white violence. And so that's sort of the context in which our study is rooted. It's that sort of backdrop—that we're trying to adjudicate between these competing views.

Chancellor As they're trying to address these competing views in their article, Light and Thomas really focus on what they see as four main methodological and theoretical shortcomings in the current body of research.

Light The first one is what is geographic scope of the relationship between segregation and violence? The majority of studies looking at this relationship have relied on data from central cities. You get data from Chicago, Detroit, pick your city... The consequence of that is it's undervalued the role of suburbs. And that's particularly consequential when you're interested in talking about the consequences of segregation for whites. Because the overwhelming majority of whites don't live in the central cities. They live in the suburbs. I'm pretty sure I'm correct on this statistic—if you look at the 100 largest metro areas in the country, in 1990, 74 percent of metropolitan whites live in the suburbs, not the central cities. In 2010, I think it's 78 percent of whites live in the suburbs. For African Americans in that same year, it's only about 50 percent. So, the point is that a super majority of whites live in the suburbs and that suburbanization is part of the story of segregation. And so if you're interested in talking about the consequences of segregation for whites, we think you have to include areas outside of the central city. So, in our analysis, we look at a unit of analysis referred to as the metropolitan statistical area, which includes the central cities, so it would include a place like Chicago but then it would also include the surrounding municipalities that you would think of as suburbs of Chicago, so Naperville would be a good example. So that's one facet, is understanding the geographic scope.

Chancellor The second concern they bring up is about the relative lack of longitudinal research on segregation and violence.

Light So the bulk of studies that have looked at this have been cross sectional, so again, they're sort of snapshot points in time, so you get data from 1990 or 2000. The problem with that is simply that it can't speak to understanding how the changes in segregation influence changes in homicide. That's a question that's inherently longitudinal. So it requires you to look at this over a longer period of time and what's interesting about that is not only do we have few analyses that look at this relationship over

Light, continued time between segregation and violence, but the few studies that have looked at this have come to conflicting views about the effect of segregation. Again, overall research suggests that segregation is driving black white differences in homicide. And so if that was the case, if that is the case, then what we should see is that as there's been greater black white integration since the 1970s, we should see the homicide gap close. And that's exactly what we see is the black white homicide gap has indeed closed since the 1970s. It's still pretty noticeable, but it's smaller now than it used to be. An article in the American Sociological Review in 2010 found that while the black-white homicide gap has closed, integration doesn't seem to be playing much of a role there. In fact they have a quote in the conclusion somewhere where says, well, maybe we need to rethink some of these standard demographic arguments for why we see black white differences in homicide. We actually published -- me and a coauthor of mine in 2016 in the American Sociological Review -- published an article where we reach an opposite conclusion. We find sure enough that the black white homicide gap did indeed close, but we actually show that part of a main reason for that is integration. So, we agree that the black white homicide gap has closed, but we disagree about the role that segregation played in doing that? Does that make sense? That's the second part -- we wanted to fill this relative void in longitudinal research looking at segregation and crime and in doing so we spent a lot of time trying to figure out why are there these conflicting findings.

Chancellor The third factor they focus on is that research that looks at race-specific rates of crime has had a hard time keeping up with increasing ethnic diversity in the United States.

Light Between 1970 and 2010, the Hispanic population quintupled in the United States. Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the country. And this is particularly important when you're looking at race-specific rates of crime, specifically white rates of crime because most of our criminal justice statistics don't include ethnic identifiers. The most widely used one is the FBI uniform crime reports. And they've recently started collecting information on Hispanics, but you can't tease out Hispanics from other groups. So, for example, if you're interested in calculating the white non-Hispanic rate, the black non-Hispanic rate, the Hispanic rate of, you know, pick a crime, you wouldn't be able to do that using the UCR statistics. And that's a problem specifically because if you want to look at white rates of violence or white rates of crime because most Hispanics are counted as white. For example in our data, we have homicide data—about 98-97 percent of white homicide victims tend to be classified their race as white. The problem is that Hispanics tend to get counted as white and Hispanic rates of crime tend to be higher than whites. What happens is that it sort of artificially inflates the white rate and it gives us a very unclear picture of difference between white and black rates of crime. We give some examples in the paper—in a place like Chicago—the white non-Hispanic rate is about half what the white rate is if you include Hispanics in there. In a place like Los Angeles, it's about a third smaller, so white non-Hispanic rate is about 1/3rd of what the overall white rate is Hispanics are included in the homicide victimization rate. So, the third part of our analysis is really trying to be attentive to the growing ethnic diversity, so we actually use a different data source than criminal justice statistics. We use homicide mortality data from the Center for Disease Control. The Center for Disease Control includes cause of death information for basically all death certificates collected in the United States. The utility of using that data source is that they actually do include racial and ethnic identifiers. So now we actually can tease out ethnic involvement in crime and look at the white non-Hispanic and black non-Hispanic rates.

Chancellor And finally, the fourth issue they think deserves more attention involves thinking about the relationship between segregation and violence. Does segregation lead to more violence, or is it the other way around?

Light The hypothesized relationship is that segregation increases violence. So places that are more segregated tend to have more violent crime. But there's a very plausible reason to think that the relationship could work in the exact opposite. That places that have more violent crime tend to lead to more segregation and in fact there's some research to suggest this. Cities that have high rates of crime, people tend to move out and they move to the suburbs. To the extent that different racial groups tend to do

Light, continued that. So if whites are leaving the cities to move to suburbs due to high rates of crime, that's going to lead to segregation. Empirically that's a problem for analyses, just trying to tease out which way does the causal arrow actually point to. So that's the fourth thing that we try to be attentive to in this paper. We do that by using what is commonly referred to as an instrumental variable analysis to try to break the simultaneity in the segregation/violence link.

Chancellor Getting to their study, I asked Professor Light what they looked at and what they found.

Light What we do in this analysis is we have data on a 103 metropolitan statistical areas across five decades, so 1970 to 2010. So it gives us 515 cases and what we are trying to do in this analysis is understand essentially two things: What is the relationship between black white segregation and black homicide and what is the relationship between black white segregation and white homicide? We engage quite a few different types of analyses from descriptive to multivariate to instrumental variable, but the overall goal is to try to answer that question of how segregation affects homicide for different groups. And what we find is that consistent with almost all the research in this area is that segregation harms African Americans. Increased segregation between 1970 and 2010 leads to higher rates of black homicide. And that is very much consistent with what others have found in this area. However, we find the exact opposite relationship when we look at white rates of homicide. What we find is that increased black white segregation leads to fewer white homicides which is consistent again if we refer back to our competing hypotheses, is more consistent with Massey's argument that segregation persists because whites benefit from it. So our overall analysis, the weight of the evidence from our analysis is more in line with Massey's argument, that segregation does seem to benefit whites while simultaneously harming African Americans.

Chancellor And Light says that there's a third story going on here, which is that segregation leads to more inequality in black and white homicide rates. And here they're looking at MSAs or metropolitan statistical areas.

Light So, if you look at our most segregated metropolitan areas, those tend to be places where the black homicide rate and the white homicide rate, where there's a very large gap between those rates. In our least segregated MSAs, we tend to find the opposite. These are places where the black and white homicide rates are much closer. There's still a gap, but they're more comparable than in our more segregated MSAs. And so the implication of that is that this increase in integration since the 1970s has indeed led to a decrease in the black white homicide gap, that's one of the implications from our analysis.

Chancellor Going back to what Professor Light said about municipal boundaries and how they matter for segregation, he says this is a main issue in thinking about competing hypotheses. He says that scholars who say segregation is detrimental for whites too have mostly argued that even if whites isolate themselves in predominantly white neighborhoods in a city, the effects of segregation still catch up with them. And these studies use cities as their unit of analysis.

Light The problem both theoretically and methodologically with this approach—or at least one potential shortcoming of this approach is that it misses something that I think is fundamental about the nature of segregation. And that is that the overwhelming majority of whites didn't hunker down and segregated cities. They left the cities entirely. If you look at the nature of segregation, even going back to the postwar period, it's one of what is often referred as white flight to the suburbs. In the paper we talk about, between 1940 and 1980, the percent of white households living in metropolitan areas that lived within the central city, so if you look at all metropolitan whites and you say, 'what proportion of them actually live in the central city?' Between 1940 and 1980, it went from 64% to 32% so only a minority of whites still live in the central city. That's not the case for African Americans. So, for a variety of reasons, legal—again, Richard Rothstein's recent book talks a lot about sort of the history of excluding African Americans from this postwar suburbanization. And that's exactly what we find. Over this same period, 1940 to 1980, African Americans, if you look at their proportion living in central

Light, continued cities only went from 80 percent to 72 percent. So they were essentially excluded from this postwar suburbanization. What's happened is, what segregation used to be defined by within-municipal neighborhood sorting, so within the city of Chicago, or within the city of New York, people were sorting themselves into different neighborhoods. And for the past, I would say, 50-60 years, that's been replaced by what I would call across-municipal sorting. That is that people aren't segregating themselves in neighborhoods within the city of Detroit, they're segregating themselves outside of the city of Detroit.

Chancellor Light says that if segregation was happening within a city, within municipal boundaries, it might make sense that the costs of segregation would be more shared.

Light You're sort of on the same tax base, you use a lot of the same services, schools, ambulances, police officers. But that may not be the case if you're segregating across municipal boundaries. So if you actually are living in a different city, you're just near that central city, the argument that Doug Massey makes is that because whites have now moved to this sort of macro-level segregation, again this sort of across municipal boundaries sorting, they've sort of concentrated social problems within the black community while simultaneously shielding themselves from those social problems. And so, we think it's important to look at suburbs not only because that's where the overwhelming majority of whites live, but also because we think it theoretically changes how we understand the consequences of segregation depending on the group you're looking at.

Chancellor I asked Professor Light what our takeaway from this work should be. And he says that in some ways this speaks to the issue of black-white differences in outcomes and what we should expect from declines in segregation.

Light There are people who have published on this who have said, 'this dramatic decline in segregation, if you would have asked people 30 years ago what is going to be the effect of this, well, they would have said you'll see huge declines in black-white differences across a whole host of social outcomes. And some scholars have said, we just haven't really seen that. Our results are more consistent with this view that in fact segregation does play a very significant role in black-white differences in violence and homicide. And so this could be at least part of the story for why, even though we've seen this pretty substantial decline in black white segregation, black white segregation is still very high. And again you can just look at any map of segregation, pick your city and you'll see clustering of neighborhoods, you'll see clustering within suburbs. We think that could be the story for why it could be. Again, this is consistent with this idea of segregation persisting because whites benefit from it.

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