

Several recent items in the news and scholarly journals touch on longstanding debates within the fields of criminology and criminal justice. Though it is often maddening to read opinions contrary to ones own research findings or beliefs, such debates may nonetheless provide fodder for future research by clearly staking out testable hypotheses. CJRC affiliates may also find these articles to be useful tools to generate classroom discussion.

Sexism, or Just Violence?

In an essay in the Spring 2006 issue of *Contexts*, Richard B. Felson asks, Is violence against women about women or about violence? In a variation on the specialized vs. versatile offender debate, Felson argues that most male violence against women is committed by men who are involved in a panoply of criminal activities. The violence perspective is that theories of crime (rather than theories of sexism) should thus be used to explain violence against women. (See also Felsons 2002 monograph on the topic, entitled *Violence and Gender Reexamined*.)

He focuses on six points: First, women and men use physical force in intimate relationships with nearly equal frequency (but the effects of such force are greater against women). Second, he provides survey evidence that wives are as domineering as husbands in relationships, but in different ways (for example, women may be more concerned about a spouses companions and whereabouts, whereas men may prevent wives from working outside the home). Third, he argues that rape frequency is indeterminate: interactions that gender theorists may identify as rape may, to a violence theorist, be ambiguous, and our inability to know what happened (and reliance on recounted information) limits the ability to resolve this debate. Fourth, he argues that evidence of a dominance-based rape motive is contradictory, and that rape may have a sexual motivation. Fifth, he argues that men with more traditional views regarding gender roles have been found to be less likely to engage in violence against women. Finally, he argues that the evidence does not support the view that men get away with sexual assault. In the end, he argues that social activism rather than science may be coloring research on the topic.

Although an essay is, by necessity, brief, Felsons arguments seem to neglect the ways in which the evidence may equally support the gender perspective. For example, the evidence used to support the point that men and women are equally domineering illustrated clear gender differences in the types of domineering behavior, with men more likely to prevent wives from taking jobs outside the home, or restricting wives access to family financial information. Further, such domineering or demanding behavior may be of a different effect when it can be enforced through the prospect of physical dominance.

Why are Cohabiting Relationships More Violent Than Marriages?

In the February 2006 issue of *Demography*, Catherine T. Kenney and Sara S. McLanahan examine the higher rate of domestic violence among cohabiting couples as compared to married couples. Prior research argued that the difference was attributable to differences in institutionalized controls between cohabiting and marital couples. For example, married couples may have greater stakes in conformity, and may be more likely to work out problems rather than resorting to violence.

In this research, the authors explore an alternate view: that the difference is attributable to selection into and out of marital and cohabiting relationships, such that the least violent couples are more likely to select into marriage, and the most violent married couples are more likely to divorce. Thus, cross-sectional analyses in which the dependent variable is related to selection into and out of marriage provide only a limited picture. Violent cohabiting couples may be overrepresented in any given

cohort. As they argue, the characteristics and behaviors of those who ever cohabit differ in important ways from the characteristics of the population of cohabiting couples at a point in time (p. 137). Their research did not, however, separately assess the role of social support and social bonds in limiting domestic violence, and they merely argue that the methodological issue they have identified should be addressed whenever cross-sectional approaches are used to assess differences in domestic violence between cohabiting and married couples.

Employment and Education Statistics Mask a Deeper Plight for Young Black Men

A March 20, 2006 article in the New York Times cites several recent research projects (including one by recent CJRC guest, Bruce Western) as evidence that young, Black urban males are even more disconnected from mainstream society than comparably situated White males or Latinos. The share of jobless young Black men has continued to climb, with 72% of young Black high school dropouts out of work in 2004 (compared to 34% of White male and 19% of Latino dropouts). Among high school graduates, half of the Black men in their 20s were jobless in 2004, compared to 46% in 2000.

The men interviewed in the article indicated that they were having difficulties overcoming past incarceration. Further, their presence in neighborhoods creates a stigma that works against the employment prospects of even law-abiding men. As one frustrated man in his early 40s noted, I don't want to be a criminal at age 50.

Surprisingly, one positive social program has had a negative effect on these men's intention to obtain permanent work: child support enforcement. Noncustodial fathers who take regular work run the risk of having their wages garnished, which discourages them from taking more than sporadic, informal employment.

Studies cited in the article are Ronald B. Mincy's *Black Males Left Behind* (Urban Institute Press 2006); Harry J. Holzer, Peter Edelman, and Paul Offner's *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men* (Urban Institute Press 2006); Gary Orfield's *Dropouts in America* (Harvard Education Press 2004); and Bruce Western's *Punishment and Inequality in America* (Russell Sage Press forthcoming).

Orlando Patterson Calls for New Approaches to the Plight of Urban Black Men

In partial response to the studies cited above, all of which emphasize the ways in which macrostructural forces restrict and shape prospects for young Black men, Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson wrote an editorial in the Times on March 26, 2006 entitled *A Poverty of the Mind*, in which he argues that social scientists neglect compelling potential explanations for the problem due to a reluctance to consider the contribution of group cultural characteristics. He argues that socioeconomic factors have limited explanatory value, and that social scientists unduly ignore culture due to fears that cultural explanations blame the victim, and offer little opportunity for social change.

In contrast, Patterson offers a unique twist on the problem: that the subculture in which young Black males are embroiled is, in fact, not disconnected from mainstream culture. Rather, mainstream corporate culture exalts and promotes hip hop artists, professional basketball players, and what Patterson terms homeboy fashions. Moreover, Black youths believe they are admired and mimicked by White adolescents as authentic participants in this portion of mainstream culture. The difference between poor Black adolescents and White adolescents, however, is that more White adolescents know when it is time to turn off Fifty [sic] Cent and get out the SAT prep book (Section A, p. 13).