

Rushton on Race and Crime: The Evidence Remains Unconvincing¹

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In this brief note, we respond to Rushton's continued emphasis on the role genetic factors play in explaining crime patterns. Specifically, we examine the new data Rushton has provided to sustain his theory that a hierarchy of races exists, which is reflected in the differential crime rates of the races.

On the topic of race and crime, Radzinowicz and King (1977: 35-36) have written:

There is a persistent tendency to regard with suspicion those of different origins, to try to assert their inferiority in intelligence, morality or both. To enter into open discussion of links between race and crime is to enter a mine-field. Politically the issue is dynamite. Claims that certain ethnic groups are inferior have served, throughout history, to justify all kinds of persecution, oppression, exploitation.

Sagarin (1980: 18) has also called for those investigating areas such as race and crime to exercise special sensitivity:

. . . one must be aware of the volatile nature of the material with which one is dealing, and the responsible criminologist offers findings with special care and circumspection when their potential for social harm is great.

Silberman (1978: 117) has further noted:

. . . it is impossible to talk honestly about the role of race in American life without offending and angering both whites and blacks — and Hispanic browns and native American reds as well. The truth is too terrible on all sides; and we are all too accustomed to the soothing euphemisms and inflammatory rhetoric with which the subject is cloaked.

Professor Rushton has made some profoundly serious comments about the relationship between race and crime (and its presumed genetic underpinnings) in a number of publications, scientific meetings, as well as in the media. Yet nowhere does he display the slightest hesitation in drawing inferences which, were policymakers to take them seriously, might have catastrophic social consequences. He infers, on the basis of very limited and superficial data sets, that: (1) crime is associated with a racial hierarchy in which Mongoloids are considered most law-abiding, Negroids least law-abiding, and Caucasoids are located somewhere in between and (2) that such an association is largely due to inherited racial differences.

Apart from his failure to confront the very obvious moral dimensions of his research, he has failed to address any of the methodological and substantive criticisms we have directed at his assertions on race and crime in our paper, "Lombrosian Wine in a New Bottle: Research on Race and Crime." He did not say a word about our contention that his tripartite classification of the races is no longer valid: this fact puts into question the very foundation of his racial comparisons. In fact, he acknowledges the ambiguity of the concept of race when he states that people such as the "Malays" are not classifiable due to "uncertainty as to their racial category". Nowhere does Rushton operationalize "race", the key independent variable in all his work on social behaviour.

Since he relies almost exclusively on criminal justice statistics, which any informed scholar knows may be contaminated by the differential treatment of minority groups, it is incumbent on him to recognize the weaknesses of his data. Yet, nowhere, in response to our paper, does he address the meaning of the aggregate-level correlations upon which he centers his argument. He also fails to address the fact that, were the correlations valid, they might just as plausibly be interpreted as reflecting the differential cultural, social, and political experiences of the races (assuming racial purity for the moment), rather than inherited attributes and dispositions.

Rushton also does not address, and therefore we assume he acknowledges, the errors we have identified in data he has cited in a previous paper. Interestingly, these errors consistently are in the direction supportive of Rushton's hypothesis; i.e., they exaggerate the overrepresentation

of black Americans in reported crime. He is also remarkably silent about the evidence we have provided from alternative sources of data: victimization surveys and self-reports. This evidence indicates that official crime statistics often inflate racial differences.

Furthermore, Rushton does not attempt to explain the very substantial within-race differences in criminality across cultures and over time. Dramatic changes in the criminal participation of a race within one generation, as can be found in the case of both African Americans and Britons, can only be explained by demographic and environmental factors. Nor does he attempt to reconcile with his views the fact that the homicide rate, for example, in Caribbean countries such as the Bahamas and Jamaica, as well as among African-Americans, exceeds that in most African countries, where the black population is more racially pure. In fact, Rushton asserts near the beginning of his paper that:

. . . I emphasize that considerable variability exists within each major [racial] group, as well as within numerous subdivisions . . . Racism is the failure to acknowledge such within-group variation and to treat (usually mistreat) people in a category as though they were all the same.

Rushton stresses that he is merely speaking of genetic influence rather than determination and he acknowledges our arguments regarding the situational influence in and interactional context of much violent crime. He also recognizes that "socialization obviously has a significant role to play in achievement, sexuality, and social organization." Further to the role of genetics in crime, Rushton says the following:

But how much of the variance in crime among the races is of genetic origin? At the moment this is unknown. That some of it is, however, is highly likely from several lines of reasoning.

We do not deny that human behaviour is influenced by genetic factors. Suggesting some link between genetics and social behaviour is very different from positing that racial variations in crime rates are influenced by genetic factors. To demonstrate such a point, one would have to accurately determine the racial lineage of subjects, something Rushton cannot do with his aggregate data. Instead, he talks about Negroid and Caucasoid countries as though racial homogeneity existed therein. As we have noted in our earlier paper, the racial mixtures in much of the

world are such as to invalidate most racial comparisons. About half of those considered to be African Americans are over half white by lineage (Radzinowicz and King 1977). Race, therefore, is often more a social than a biological category.

To demonstrate a strong genetically-based race/crime link, an investigator would also have to deal with the multitudinous shortcomings of official crime statistics upon which all of Rushton's arguments rest. One would additionally have to control for the confounding effects of social disadvantage, political disenfranchisement, cultural traits, demographic influences, and the labelling processes to which some social groups are more often subject than others.

INTERPOL Data

The evidence Rushton introduces in the paper he has prepared for this issue reflects the type of misleading inferences he draws from aggregated data. In Table 2, he presents the homicide, rape, and serious assault rates for countries he has designated as Mongoloid, Caucasoid, and Negroid. He uses INTERPOL data — an unstandardized data base which is highly sensitive to the differential legal definitions, reporting, and recording practices of the countries around the world.

Rushton states that "individually motivated and capricious assault and murder is universally condemned and clearly provides a good index of social disorganization. With homicides, the U.S. has the highest rate in the industrialized world, but 49% are committed by Negroids and 13% by Hispanics." In this statement Rushton confuses homicide with murder, which is voluntary, criminal homicide. This statement also suggests that Rushton believes that all assaults and murders are individually motivated, impulsive and condemned within the milieu they are committed. In many countries, politically-motivated killings are included in the homicide data. Many assaults and killings are also committed by gangs and organized groups who approve of such behaviour, rather than by individuals striking impulsively at some randomly selected victim. In Canada and many other countries, most killings take place within the context of a social or business relationship. Frequently these acts are not committed purely on a whim; rather, the perpetrator has at least contemplated injuring the victim — a good example is that of spousal assault

and homicide. Furthermore, in many milieux, violence is a socially acceptable response to provocation: no act is universally condemned. It is to such sweeping and superficial statements that we object most vehemently.

Even if we accept his view that "murder" rates constitute the best index of social disorganization, the INTERPOL data he presents do not support his view that "Negroids" are most lawless, followed by "Caucasoids", and then "Mongoloids". For both 1984 and 1986, "Mongoloid" countries far exceeded "Caucasoid" countries in their average homicide rates. In any event, his numbers lack a great deal of meaning because the averages are unweighted. The homicide rate for China, a country with approximately a billion inhabitants, is assigned no greater weight than that for Luxembourg or the Cayman Islands. Rushton then combines homicides, rapes, and assaults and emerges with his predicted pattern; that is, "Negroid" countries with the highest rate of total violent crime and "Mongoloid" countries with the lowest. This aggregation nullifies his counterintuitive findings on homicide, as the higher assault rates overwhelm the lower homicide figures. Although we might agree that homicide data are more likely to be consistently and accurately reported around the world, we fail to agree with Rushton's point that rape and serious assault are "relatively unambiguous". Rape is notoriously underreported and highly sensitive to the public attitudes, victim services available, the status of women, and the practices of the police and courts prevailing in a given society. Thus, the evidence Rushton presents on international crime is very soft and also fails to fit his predicted pattern. There is also a problem here of external validity, as he generalizes his findings on race and crime after he obtains his expected result for only two of many offences.

Finally, it is worth noting that the so-called "Negroid" countries differ from "Caucasoid" nation in many ways other than the racial composition of their inhabitants. That Rushton fails to even discuss competing explanations (e.g., socio-economic and cultural) for his findings suggests a profound bio-genetic bias on his part. Again, simple correlations are interpreted by him as demonstrating unambiguous, causal relationships between race and crime.

In his sweeping aggregate statistics, Rushton tries to see the forest without the trees and misses out on the substance and texture of every-

day life. Rushton, although acknowledging the importance of individual differences, ignores the individual, his/her perceptions of the world, and how these perceptions affect human behaviour. People can feel helpless and hopeless in oppressive circumstances. In many American urban ghettos, the unemployment rate for teenagers approximates 50%. Is it any wonder, then, that many young black teenagers are applying their ingenuity to entrepreneurship in the drug trade or other illicit activities. As such, they will become statistics that Rushton will construe, when aggregated, as signs of impulsivity, lawlessness, and degeneration. Upon closer scrutiny, however, their behaviour may be very rational (costs and benefits are considered), disciplined (organized networks exist with a division of labour), and even be socially valued in their neighbourhoods, although they may be seen as violating social norms by outsiders imposing their own standards upon the behaviour. Albert Bandura (1977: 230), the social learning theorist, has written:

. . . people frequently engage in violent activities not because of reduced self-control but because their cognitive skills and self-control are enlisted all too well through moral justifications and self-exonerative devices in the service of destructive causes. The massive threats to human welfare are generally brought about by deliberate acts of principle rather than by unrestrained acts of impulse. It is the principled resort to aggression that is of greatest social concern but is most ignored in psychological theorizing and research.

Rushton ignores everything but conventional street crime. If he looked at crime in the boardrooms or suites instead of the streets, the racial configuration of his statistics would be very different. This is not just an academic argument. The deaths and injuries due to corporate health and safety violations, as well as due to the marketing of dangerous products, in many countries far exceed those due to homicide, assault, and other interpersonal violent crimes (Hagan 1987). Also, the financial losses to society of fraud, embezzlement, tax evasion, and other such economic crimes — the bulk of which are attributable to higher status white people — may dwarf those accruing from robberies and burglaries. Since Rushton adopts an evolutionary perspective, he should surely appreciate that among the most destructive acts to society are those involving abuse of the environment. Crimes such as those committed by Hooker Chemical Company, in which thousands of tons of toxic chemicals were buried near a residential area cannot be ignored. Hooker's dumping led to a dramatic increase of birth defects, cancer, and other illnesses, resulting in

the eventual evacuation of the Love Canal area near Niagara Falls (Ermann and Lundman 1982). These offences, too, tend to be committed by higher status individuals who, in Western countries at least, are predominantly “Caucasoids”.

In addition, much is being written today about the rationality of criminal behaviour, including conventional crime (Cornish and Clarke 1986). Even if Rushton could somehow demonstrate that his correlations between race and conventional crime were reliable, his inference that this overrepresentation signals the greater impulsivity of blacks is not necessarily correct. The selection of crime can be seen as a rational choice — as the best means of reaching one’s goals — when criminal opportunities are abundant, potential payoffs are sufficient, and the risks accompanying criminal behaviour are low.

It is not difficult to see why some slum dwellers turn to robbery. Facing a near hopeless economic situation, the young man in the ghetto can achieve both status and instant cash through robbery (Gabor, Baril, Cusson, Elie, LeBlanc and Normandeau 1987). As far as risks are concerned, living in overcrowded conditions and facing the prospect of life on welfare, does he have much to lose even if he is unlucky enough (the probability is low) to be convicted for his acts? Are middle class academics in a position to label his acts as impulsive? We are not speaking here of full rationality. Probably no one, including an accountant, takes out a ledger and weighs meticulously the costs and benefits of all of life’s decisions. In any event, people rarely have access to all the information relevant to a decision. What we are saying, however, is that the desperation of his situation and the countless blocked opportunities (e.g., in housing, education, and employment) permeate the ghetto dweller’s entire existence, resulting in choices which, while illegal, to him may be the most obvious and promising courses of action.

Studies of the crime of rape, too, show that this offence is anything but a purely impulsive act. Neither the timing, location, nor the victim are selected randomly. The most thorough analysis of this crime ever conducted found that only about 16 percent of the incidents qualified, according to the author, as “explosive” (Amir 1971). In 71 percent of the cases, the offence was classified as planned: the place was arranged, elaborate enticement was employed, or the victim was deliberately sought

out and a plan was devised to coerce her into sexual relations in a pre-determined place. Thus, ingenuity, craft, and discipline are sometimes used in the commission of crimes regarded by Rushton as impulsive and capricious.

The aggregated data that Rushton repeatedly cites fail to address these issues. He treats crime categories as though they are monolithic, as though all homicides and rapes are the same. The motives for homicide are protean: this is reflected in typologies of crime. He claims we have overly deconstructed the data. Although aggregation can be useful in guiding policy, it can also seriously obscure the complexity and variability of the phenomenon being investigated. Nowhere does Rushton discuss the limitations and dangers of aggregation. Discussion of the fallacies of aggregation and of making inferences about individuals on the basis of aggregated data permeates the ecological literature in criminology (e.g., Robison 1950).

Rushton claims that, in our first paper, we did not say why it is that aggregation of all crime figures should produce an overestimate of crimes by American blacks. We did, in fact, explain that the crimes in which blacks are more likely to be involved (e.g., robbery) are more likely to be reported than those crimes (e.g., theft) in which whites are more likely to commit. The total crime figures, therefore, will exaggerate black involvement in crime.

Rushton also re-introduces the Lombrosian concept of "stigmata" by way of the suggestion that central nervous system anomalies may be discernible on the body surface. This assertion is highly speculative. The concept of stigmata has as much relevance for contemporary scientific criminology as Mesmer's work for psychology, the procedure of bleeding for modern medicine, or the Inquisition for contemporary jurisprudence.

What are we to make of the "historical data" presented in the paper? Rushton claims to find support for his theory in two historical facts: (1) the advanced degree of social organization in China 2,500 years ago (compared to European civilizations at the time) and (2) the fact that post-colonial Africa lags behind the rest of the world in social organization. Are we to assume that the technological and bureaucratic superiority displayed by the Spanish conquistadors over the indigenous

South Americans reflected a genetic basis? This kind of idle speculation has no place in a scientific article.

Rushton, in his rebuttal to us, now says he is looking to explain only some of the variance in racial differences in crime. He does this through the use of a single index of crime (official crime data), at only the highest level of aggregation (national and international statistics), infers causality from zero-order correlations, and fails to enter into any discussion about the nature and substance of crime. He thus uses very tenuous evidence to identify some fine racial differences even though such tinkering could result in serious setbacks to socially disadvantaged groups. In short, Rushton repeats his earlier assertions and provides some questionable international comparisons. Not much is new, and that which is new remains unconvincing.

Notes

1. The authors are grateful for the comments of colleague Mike Petrunik.

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