Race and Youth Crime: Why Isn’t the Relationship Stronger?

By

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Criminologists have devoted much effort to explaining why African American youth have higher rates of serious offending than whites. But data suggest that African American youth have similar rates of minor offending than whites, and that the large share of African American youth are no more likely to engage in serious crime than whites. This is the case even though African American youth are much more likely than white youth to be exposed to many of the leading causes of crime, including discrimination, poverty, and residence in very poor communities. This raises a major question that has been neglected by criminologists: why isn’t the relationship between race and youth crime stronger? Drawing on limited criminological research and several literatures outside criminology, this paper describes a range of protective factors that may reduce the likelihood that African American youth respond to discrimination and its negative consequences with crime. These factors fall into four groups: skills in coping, strengths in the face of adversity, social supports, and social controls (the four “S”s).

Robert Agnew is the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Sociology at Emory University. His research focuses on the causes of crime and delinquency, particularly his general strain theory of delinquency. His recent books include Juvenile Delinquency: Causes and Control (Oxford, 2015); Criminological Theory: Past to Present (Oxford, 2014); Toward A Unified Criminology: Integrating Assumptions about Crime, People, and Society (NYU Press, 2011); Pressured into Crime: An Overview of General Strain Theory (Oxford, 2006); and Why Do Criminals Offend: A General Theory of Crime and Delinquency (Oxford, 2005). He has served as President of the American Society of Criminology, is a Fellow of that organization, and is on the Southern Sociological Society Roll of Honor.