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# Youth Violence— Crime or Self-Help? Marginalized Urban Males’ Perspectives on the Limited Efficacy of the Criminal Justice System to Stop Youth Violence

By

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In 1983, sociologist Donald Black proposed the theory of “Crime as Social Control,” in which he argued that for the socially disadvantaged, crime is commonly moralistic and can be characterized as self-help in the pursuit of justice when legal protection fails. This article uses Black’s theory as a framework to assess the role of violence among African American male youth in disadvantaged urban communities in New York City. Using in-depth interview data for 416 young violent male offenders, the authors analyze youths’ perspectives on their personal safety; access to legal, governmental, and communal protection from violence; the effectiveness of the criminal justice system and police in addressing crime and violence in their neighborhoods; and the need to rely on self- and group/gang-protection as a means of social control. The implications for self-help theory are discussed.

*Keywords:* African American; youth violence; self-help; social control; marginalization; racialized groups; police protection

In every society, cultural norms for behavior determine social deviance and the laws that govern social conduct. Cultural norms are produced by the dominant society, and within this framework, the needs, norms, protection, and grievances of marginalized groups are commonly ignored. Given this reality, Black argues that individuals in marginalized groups are forced to take the law “into their own hands” (Black 1983, 1993). He calls this phenomenon *self-help* and describes the conditions under which crime represents such *self-help*. Researchers, policy makers, and criminal justice officials provide statistics “proving” that black males are more likely than other marginalized groups to commit crimes. As Piquero (2008, 60) reports, “Across many years and data sources, statistics on criminal activity consistently point to race differences in crime, with rates of minorities, especially those of blacks, consistently dwarfing the rates of whites.” African Americans are also more likely

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to experience criminal or juvenile justice processing than other racial groups. At every stage of juvenile justice, black male youth are disproportionately represented. They are more likely than others to be under surveillance, arrested, confined, and sentenced to longer prison terms (Conley 1994; Piquero 2008).

Compared to whites and Latinos, black youth are especially vulnerable to police contact (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne 2005). Indeed, black urban males are the group most likely to be exposed to high-impact policing. And as Brunson and Miller (2006, 615) point out, such youths' negative experiences with police lead them to believe that they are viewed as "symbolic assailants," that is, people whom police approach as dangerous/violent because of their gestures, language, attire, and so on. As such, members of this population tend to have deep feelings of betrayal and distrust of governmental authorities (Fine et al. 2003) and a perception of lack of available police protection (Carr, Napolitano, and Keating 2007), which is one of the prominent reasons youth give for not calling the police.

In this study, we examine crime-involved youth and focus on (1) perceptions of their own personal safety within their neighborhoods; (2) perceptions of the efficacy of police and the criminal justice system; and (3) use of violence in conflict situations, with an eye to their implications for Black's (1983, 1993) self-help theory. Conceptualizing self-help as the use of violence or the threat of violence to address a grievance, we classify violent and near-violent events by the spark (grievance) that initiates them. Furthermore, we examine the situational characteristics of such events and consider whether respondents access the law and

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whether violent events are otherwise brought to the attention of the police. While our interpretations and framings of encounters, their situational context, and their aftermath draw on the self-help perspective, our more general goal is to better understand how racialized groups perceive, seek, and experience justice. In so doing, the research sheds light on one of the many ways that race matters in the way justice is distributed in the modern United States.

## Self-Help Theory and Consideration of How Race Matters

Black (1993) argues that crime becomes social control when state law and protection fail. Therefore, many offenses committed by members of marginalized groups are said to involve a moralistic pursuit of justice. Because of the moral nature of such crime, Black (1993, 6) posits that these incidents are acts of *self-help*, “the expression of a grievance by unilateral aggression such as personal violence or property destruction.” He further notes that people are more or less likely to engage in this form of self-help when (1) law is unavailable to those with grievances; (2) law is unavailable to the victim in comparison with the offender; and (3) law is available, but not to those against whom one would employ self-help (Black 1993). Adolescents and minorities are likely groups for whom formal law is often unavailable because of their low social status. Thus, at least a portion of their crimes could involve self-help to resolve conflicts.

Black (1983, 40) explained that most violent conduct of those in subordinate social positions is “intended as a punishment or other expression of disapproval, whether applied reflectively or impulsively, with coolness or in the heat of passion.” Thus, as an attempt to gain reparation for a violation, a violent act or property damage may ensue instantly or long after the initial violation. What appears to be unimportant to the police, and members of the dominant group, may be perceived as a major violation for young minority males—a violation that is accepted as worthy enough for killing or being killed (Black 1983). Indeed, Black (1983) reports that acts of self-help may be more unforgiving and harsh than actions that would be taken by the law.

Hawkins (1986) and West (1994) proposed race-specific explanations for violent crime among blacks in America that are consonant with self-help theory. Hawkins argues that violence by blacks is explained by facts such as (1) the criminal justice system’s devaluing of black life; (2) past and present racial and social class differences in the administration of justice; and (3) economic deprivation, which creates a climate of powerlessness in which individual acts of violence are likely to occur. Connecting self-help with racial subordination, he suggests that “social economic disadvantage generates sociopathological conditions in which violent crime among lower class blacks represents a socially disapproved, but predictable, effort to achieve some measure of control in an environment characterized by social, political and economic powerlessness” (p. 125). Hawkins identifies social learning and

the existence of a positive attitude toward the use of violence as mechanisms through which violent self-help becomes a prominent form of social control. West argues that the result of nihilism in black America is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. He explains that "The accumulated effect of the black wounds and scars suffered in a white-dominated society is a deep-seated anger, boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America's will to justice" (p. 28). West also notes that "the focus on young people is important: so many of them have reached the conclusion that America is not merely a lie, but it doesn't even have the structural capacity to treat poor black people decently, humanly, and equally. And they've got good evidence for their despair" (West 2008, p. xiii).

## Empirical Studies of Violence as Social Control or Self-Help

Since the publication of Black's exposition of crime as social control (1983), empirical studies have examined self-help theory with respect to intimate partner homicide (Peterson 2002), vengeance (Phillips 2003), retaliation (Jacobs 2004), robberies of drug dealers (Topalli, Wright, and Fornango 2002), bar fights (Oliver 1994), and youth violence (de Haan and Nijboer 2005). Findings from several studies have particular relevance for the current investigation. Topalli, Wright, and Fornango (2002) studied how drug dealers who were victims of robbery handle their situations outside of the law. They found that drug dealing robbery victims use self-help (i.e., violence) to gain retribution, compensation, and deterrence against future attacks. Peterson's (2002) study of intimate partner homicides in St. Louis revealed that 81 percent of cases "reflected one of the three self-help motivational categories" (p. 119): conflict resolution, justice-seeking, or self-defense. Finally, de Haan and Nijboer (2005) examined youth violence in Amsterdam and Groningen. Their interview data point to three conditions under which juvenile violence reflects self-help: (1) mistrust of the police and the legal system, (2) a subculture of group or neighborhood territoriality, and (3) constant threat of violence. They conclude that "Self-help can also be regarded as a relatively autonomous form of informal social control with its own logic, organization, and characteristic features" (p. 18).

## Methods

The data for this research are from the New York City Youth Violence Study, a qualitative investigation of 416 active violent offenders from two New York City neighborhoods: East New York in Brooklyn and Mott Haven in the South Bronx. These areas were selected because of their high levels of poverty and violent

crime. The interview data were gathered between September 1995 and July 1998 (Wilkinson 2003). The sampling design targeted males between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four from three pools of subjects: individuals convicted of illegal handgun possession or a violent offense (the criminal justice sample,  $n = 150$  or 36 percent), individuals injured in a violent transaction (the hospital sample,  $n = 62$  or 15 percent), and individuals identified by screening as having been actively involved in violence in the previous six months (the neighborhood samples,  $n = 204$  or 49 percent). The research reported below is based on the responses of the African American subjects (49 percent). However, 39.3 percent of the sample is Latino, and Latino youth evidence patterns similar to those of black youth. (See Wilkinson [2003, 2007] for additional details about the sample for this study.)

The in-depth interviews took one to two hours and were conducted by trained "peer" interviewers, recruited through the first author's involvement with a nonprofit organization that provided reentry services to young offenders leaving Rikers Island. Participants were paid \$20 for their time. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. They covered family experiences, school, employment, peer relationships, neighborhood processes and violence, direct and vicarious victimization (exposure to community violence), guns, drug use, violence, criminal activity, future goals, and views on solutions to youth violence problems. The findings are based on respondents' reports on 778 violent or near-violent events. The violent event protocol included questions about the emotional/behavioral context, steps of the event, characteristics of opponents, third parties, weapons used, presence of alcohol/drugs, injuries, police activity, outcomes, and rationales for violence (Wilkinson 2003).

## Results

In general, and as reported in Table 1, most of the youth experience a lack of socially acceptable agency in controlling their environment. Indeed, a majority report that neither the criminal justice system nor the police are doing their part to reduce youth violence in neighborhoods. Consistent with the self-help theme, many youth feel justified in being involved in crime because they view the system as failing to make their neighborhoods safe. Another emergent theme from youths' reports is their profound lack of access to the law in dealing with violent situations despite their heightened exposure to environmental stresses and interpersonal grievances. The investigation also highlights youths' perceptions of the role of the authorities in enhancing violence by their failure to recognize the validity of young men's issues and grievances, police mistreatment, and the lack of equal protection. The discussion is organized into five themes that relate to how African American youth understand and respond to racial injustices in protection from violence: (1) the community context that shapes self-help, (2) institutionalized police corruption and police officers' motives in handling conflicts among black

TABLE 1  
PERSPECTIVE ON THE EFFICACY OF OFFICIALS IN  
REDUCING VIOLENCE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Do You Feel _____ Is/Are Doing Its Part to Reduce Violence in Your Neighborhood?	Community Leaders	Religious Leaders	The Criminal Justice System	The Police Department
Yes	24	35	31	31
Somewhat	8	12		10
They are trying	20	24	10	12
They are present, but using wrong tactics	0	0	21	21
Leaders can't do anything	2	0	0	0
No	128	69	110	127
Hell no	3	0	7	6
I don't know	3	5	5	0
There are no religious leaders	0	24	0	0
I don't associate with religious leaders	0	5	0	0
Total	188	174	184	207

youth, (3) negative appraisals by police of African Americans and associated lack of faith in police protection, (4) engagement in self-help rather than going to the police to deal with violent incidents, and (5) views of the actual and ideal roles of police in their communities.

### *How context shapes self-help*

Many youth perceive that nothing can be done to protect them on the streets from violence in their neighborhoods. For example, Jason acknowledges that police have limited power to protect young men from violence:

Ain't nothing could protect young guys from violence. That's a simple fact, What's somebody going to do? What the police going to do? Come over and lock a couple of people up? A few days later, it still going to be going on, people getting' murdered, shot, anything. God forbid I die today or tomorrow, you think niggas going to slow down? . . . Yeah, [the police] they doing everything, but there ain't too many things they could do, all they could do is just arrest us, like I said.

Donnell's words also reflect the common sentiment that violence is out of control and protection is impossible in his neighborhood:

It's nothing you can really do. It's the type of world we living in . . . and whatever happens happens. . . . Anything can happen, regardless too, if you just living the right life, going to the right kind of school or whatever . . . it might be you.



Many youth set the violence problem in the larger economic context. Specifically, they attribute the plight of their communities to the need for jobs. Youth argue that because of a lack of opportunity in the formal economy, they are drawn to the informal economy as a means of survival (Sullivan 1989; Wilkinson 2003). In this context, there is a perception that the police are “enemies” as opposed to protectors. Reggie explains:

To tell you the truth police out there is like an enemy . . . cause [we] go to war with five-o, because five-o stops a nigga from making his money. So that's just creating more violence. It all got to do with jobs . . . if those people would start giving us more jobs, niggas would be off the street.

Timothy expresses the view that the criminal justice system's response to the violence problem reflects a lack of understanding of the vicious economic cycle incarceration propels and the belief that there are no legitimate economic opportunities following incarceration: “They don't understand, the more time they give a brother, the more short of money he gonna get, so when he come out he gonna have to support himself to get back on track.” Such views notwithstanding, the further enmeshed in criminal behavior they become, the less access youth have to legal protection. For example, involvement in the illegal drug economy shapes decisions about citizen-initiated contact with the police when a serious grievance has transpired. For youth who are active in the drug economy, calling the police may not be an option because the youths' means of generating income is illegal.

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*For youth who are active in the drug economy,  
calling the police may not be an option because  
the youths' means of generating income is illegal.*

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In line with their views and circumstances, feelings of safety in the study neighborhoods are linked to particular actions taken by individuals to protect themselves; affiliation with others for protection; and direct avoidance of dangerous times, places, and people. Even so, none of these strategies ensures safety with certainty. Lonnie explains,

The way that people do it now . . . the way brothers protect themselves from violence is by having guns. . . . You got [to carry] man, because the next man got a gun, he'll try to smoke you and if you ain't got a gun, you fucked up.



### *Perceived institutionalized corruption and bias*

Underscoring youths' views that police and criminal justice authorities are unable to quell violence in their areas are their perceptions of the police as corrupt, unjust, racially biased, class biased, a tool of state repression, criminal, and abusive. As shown in Table 1, more than 60 percent report feeling that neither the criminal justice system (63 percent) nor the police department (64 percent) is doing its part to reduce violence. Furthermore, many youth believe that legal officials, community and religious leaders, and neighborhood adults are afraid of them and, thus, unwilling to intervene to resolve disputes (see Wilkinson 2007). Youth also indicate that when the police do engage them it creates more violence because the police approach them as criminals. The young identify a variety of actions as indicative of police corruption, including direct brutality, racially motivated harassment and profiling, planting evidence, failure to investigate cases, and general disrespect. Furthermore, some strongly believe that police harassment heightens tensions and creates more violence by "irritating people and putting them on edge." The following statements are illustrative of youths' perceptions of police corruption.

**Joshua:** The cops working my neighborhood don't belong working in my neighborhood. How you gonna send white cops to a black neighborhood to protect and serve? You can't do that cause all they gonna see is the black faces that's committing the crimes. They all look the same. The ones that's not committing crimes looks like the niggas that is committing crimes and everybody is getting harassed.

**Tyrone:** The police, they happy, they catch you with a gun, anything, or any, they just plant, the police planting stuff on people, they going confiscate the stuff anyway.

**Dexter:** They make it worse cause niggas [the police] was fuckin' niggas [youth] up. They crooked theyself, you know what I mean? Them niggas [the police officers] would run up on the drug spot, take my drugs, they'll sell that shit back on the street, so they could go rush-knock somebody else.

**Khalid:** They be starting violence too. Like when I got locked up they fucked me up cause I wasn't suppose to be doing that. [They should] do they job, do what they get paid for. They catch you doing something put in the car and read you your rights. All that other shit beating you up ain't necessary.

**Lamont:** They be wilding on people when they approach a person, they don't approach him with no type of respect, nigga [police officer] just wild on him and make a nigga [youth] hit the floor.

**Reed:** Nah, all they do is harass people. The more people they harass the more people gonna want to get in trouble . . . they should stop harassing people.

In accounting for police corruption, youth often express the belief that the criminal justice system and police department are vested in the economic profits and/or job security maintained by jailing members of their community. Parker believes that the criminal justice system is all about profits for "the white man":

The lawyers in the court system they ain't trying to help you they trying to make you cop out. They don't care about the blacks all they care about is they pockets getting fat. The more time you do in jail the more they pockets get fat.

Antony elaborates:

If there was no violence and no crimes, there would be no jobs for lawyers. . . . Let me ask you something, would you kill out all the rats, if you were the exterminator? Would you kill off all the rats in six months? No. Because in six months you'd be out of a job.

### *Lack of faith in police protection*

Youth acknowledge pervasive gun use and its deadly consequences. Yet, they argue that police officers who are paid to “protect and serve” should do the job despite the dangers. DJ notes that “They are scared for themselves” and “scared to come around where guns are being fired cause they scared they get shot.” Donnell feels that police officers in his neighborhood avoid showing a presence in the projects where their help is needed most: “They stand on the corner on the private house side instead of being in the projects. They'd rather fuck with somebody in the private housing than with somebody in the projects.” Deshawn believes that it comes down to a matter of trust: “Youth cannot trust the police to protect them and the police do not trust young people.” Furthermore, “The police should be doing they job, they need to trust, if we could trust them to protect us [citizens would not need guns for self-protection].” He described a situation in which an old lady was robbed and fired a gun at the fleeing robber, which led Deshawn to conclude that even “old ladies” do not trust the police to protect them from criminals.

Some youth claim that the police do not view them as equally valuable and therefore believe that police show a lack of respect toward them and often harass them or worse (use violence against them). Ali explains:

It depends on what beliefs. You still got bad cops out here and then you got good cops. . . . If you stepping on me, grabbing on me, and pushing me cause you got the badge. No, . . . I'm human. First you got to talk to me like a man or whatever. You got to treat me human first.

Respondents perceive that because they are black or young, officers do not value their lives. George indicates that “They don't care. Black people out there trying to kill each other.” Echoing the same theme, Marshall describes what they should be doing:

The police should be getting a little close to the community. They don't have no (respect). They getting smart with you [more] than the person you already fighting with. What kind of shit is that? It makes you not want to cooperate. . . . They can get real involved in the community and show more respect.

These and other comments noted above reflect the tense relationship between crime-involved youth and the police in their neighborhoods. Consistent with Black's (1983, 1993) self-help perspective, such mistrust and perceived lack of access to legal help set the stage for criminal and violent self-help among marginalized populations such as African Americans and disadvantaged neighborhoods.

### *Violence as retaliation*

Thus far, we have illustrated why youth believe that legal authorities do not take their grievances seriously and that they indicate a preference for handling them without police intervention. Here, we demonstrate how self-help plays out in situational contexts, while pointing out the roles of retaliation and concerns about masculinity in self-help activities. In the study neighborhoods, conflicts that generate violence as self-help range from ones that appear to outsiders as trivial, for example, attacks on one's identity, petty theft, cheating in sports, lying, rumors, and interloping with females to ones that many would regard as serious, for example, robbery, interloping on drug territory, and lethal threats. In almost all such events, one party is violated by another party, and in most, the grievance is addressed through the use of violence. The data provide strong evidence that a youth's expressed preferences for not involving authorities in their disputes is backed up by actual lack of reliance on the police. This is true regardless of the seriousness of the grievance. One reason is that youth-initiated activity to involve the police in disputes is not considered a "manly way" of handling conflict. This orientation to masculinity is an underlying theme in respondents' discussions of subverting police investigations, including pressuring others not to cooperate with the police.

Many drug business-related violent events were examples of self-help in action. For example, DJ was almost killed over drug territory when his crew battled with another crew over "ownership" of a drug spot:

They was trying to kill us for, over territory . . . drug territory . . . We told the other group of people, they sell drugs in the neighborhood, cause we was taking over and I guess they didn't like that too much, so . . . they tried to retaliate and kill us before we could kill them, so it was just a shoot out thing, every day.

Among injured and hospitalized youth, a number report a desire to retaliate, but few cooperate with the police to gain "justice." While laid up in the hospital with bullet wounds in both legs, Martin explains that despite knowing who shot him he "did not send the police after the guy . . . because of . . . fear of retaliation and my reputation. After that . . . he got incarcerated for something else. He got caught up with the feds or something else." However, Martin does not regard his assailant's incarceration as justice for the violence that caused his injury. Quentin also describes his need to retaliate against his opponent who used a gun without offering any option for handling the conflict without a weapon:

**Quentin:** He didn't give me a chance, didn't give my father a chance [his father was shot in the same incident]. The way that he was talking, you don't think I was going to get upset and fight. I wanted to fight with my hands. The way he pulled out the gun, he didn't give me chance. So, why am I supposed to keep walking, let him get away with this shit just like that. Just because he pulled out a gun once . . .

**Interviewer:** You know, with the criminal justice system, he got two attempted murders on him, he gonna do time for this.

**Quentin:** Yeah, he gotta do time. But what if I catch him before they do? There's a chance he could walk, what am I supposed to do? I could lose my father now. If I lose my father, and they don't catch this guy, I'm gonna get his family. That's the way it works out here.

That's the way all this shit out here works. If you can't get him, get them. . . . Everybody grow up with the shit, they want respect, they want to be the man. That's how it is out here.

Quentin reflected on the possibility that even if his assailant is apprehended by the police, the system is likely to fail to bring justice. A final example comes from Andrew, who recalls an incident in which he was seriously cut when he was accosted by a group. Revenge weighed heavily on his mind, but instead of seeking legal recourse he sought out the assistance of his friends and waited for them to come to his aid for justice. Andrew explains,

I just jetted ran to my building. Got upstairs first thing on my mind retaliation. [I] picked up the phone called my man's—I use to hang with these dudes, umm over here. I am like "Yo what's up yo." [Andrew tells him what happened.] . . . He like, "yo what you want to do." I am like, "yo what you mean, what I want to do? I want to murder these niggas." Tree [his friend] like, "yo give me ten minutes I am going to gather up everybody" . . . Only [thing] I am thinking about is murdering these niggers. I am just up in my house just trying to clean my cuts. . . . I'm up in the mirror just laughing to myself. Like yo I can't believe this shit happened. But it happened . . . now it's on. [Note: his friends did not show up.]

In general, then, violence as self-help occurs in a variety of situational contexts. Such acts also often facilitate masculinity goals among marginalized young African American men.

### *Paradoxical views of the police*

Black youth recognize the complexity of the violence problem as evidence of larger racial and class issues. Despite this, they continue to believe that "proper" law enforcement and formal law could effectively reduce neighborhood violence; paradoxically, they want more police. In this sense, they hold an apparent paradox of views regarding the police: they perceive the system as unhelpful, but simultaneously want more police protection for themselves and their communities. Specifically, young men want assistance from the "right" kind of officers—persons who are willing to get to know them, see them as human, and interact with them accordingly. Lacking officers with such an approach, youth are willing to forgo police help despite the desire for police protection. That is, youth would rather engage in self-help than endure the penalties that come with assistance from authority figures, such as jailing and disdainful judgment. Youth who report that police have a presence in their communities often also indicate that officers use the wrong methods, "just locking people up." As Donnell explains, "They really cracking down on a lot of shit but it's more hassling more than doing their part [to reduce violence]. They doing it, but they doing it the wrong way." Rob feels that to reduce violence, the community needs to "get more cops on the street, but I don't want that. . . . I'd rather see the niggas fight, than have more cops on the street." Rashard explains that the police need to

be more proactive, you know, instead of starting altercations and trouble, they should try to prevent them before they happen, you know, like be proactive, when you see a problem about to occur, stop and try to find out how the problem broke out or move the people out of the area instead.

And Kelvin insists that police officers should “be a lot more open-minded. Take they job serious but not take they frustrations out on other people.”

In sum, respondents indicate that self-help is preferred over bringing the criminal justice system into dispute resolution processes. There is a profound lack of faith in and disdain for police officers. Thus, if the criminal justice system is called, youth perceive a significant likelihood that the facts of the case will not be investigated adequately and potentially the wrong parties could be taken into custody. Additionally, many of the youth admit that their social status within their peer group may be challenged if they opt for calling the police rather than using self-help. Nonetheless, the youth would like more police protection, but of the “right” kind.

## Discussion

Our analysis reveals that generally African American youth residing in poverty-stricken and violent New York City communities report considerable skepticism regarding the efficacy of the criminal justice system and policing strategies to deal with conflict and violence in their neighborhoods. Notably, youth believe that the police in particular and the justice system more broadly do not recognize their grievances. Similar to findings from other studies (Brunson and Miller 2006; Carr, Napolitano, and Keating 2007; Fine et al. 2003), respondents described examples of their experiences with police brutality, profiling and harassment by the police, overt racism, and police corruption. Needless to say, strained relationships exist between the criminal justice system, police officers, and youth. Additionally, youth admit that social status among their peers may be challenged if they opt for calling the police. The consequence is an express preference for, and reliance on, self-help over bringing criminal justice officials into dispute resolution processes and in dealing with criminal victimization. Youths' involvement in the illegal drug economy is an additional deterrent to their reliance on formal authorities for social control. Paradoxically, youths' disdain and mistrust of the system does not undermine the belief that their neighborhoods need more police officers to reduce youth violence and related offenses.

Based on the patterns observed here, it is reasonable to conclude that the study communities are the types of social contexts in which Black's (1983, 1993) theory of self-help is operative. In these marginalized New York City social contexts, young disadvantaged black males believe that they are always under terror without protection from authorities. As such, self- or crew-protection (self-help) appears to be the best available alternative (see also Jacobs 2004; Oliver 1994; Wilkinson and Carr 2008).

In addition to illustrating how self-help operates, our research has implications for future research on crime and criminal justice. For example, the analysis suggests

that explanations of criminal inequality by race/ethnicity should integrate into the conceptualization and modeling of crime measures of access to and dependability of legal protection. In addition, critical attention is needed regarding cultural constructions of crime. It appears that ignoring the frameworks, norms, grievances, and the like of marginalized groups may be at a cost of greater crime as self-help. Regarding criminal justice, one research question that has not been tackled is how self-defense as a legal construct is assessed in cases involving groups from dominant versus subordinate groups. We speculate that in contexts of strained youth-police relations, self-defense may seldom be accepted as a legitimate excuse/defense of violent activity case. Kopel (2000, p. 296) has argued in favor of legal access to self-defense as a “moral imperative . . . to use whatever force is necessary to defend themselves and their families from murder attempts. If the state ignores the moral imperative of self-defense, the state loses its moral authority.” Yet, access to legal self-defense is likely status-dependent. Given our respondents’ concerns about systemic prejudice regarding the character of young black men and the lack of seriousness with which criminal cases involving such individuals are handled, it is questionable whether Kopel’s “moral imperative” has applicability for this group, regardless of whether it would be deemed appropriate for other groups.

Finally, additional research could help strengthen and expand our conclusions in light of several limitations of the current study. First, the present study focuses only on African American, inner-city males who are, or have been, violent offenders; the results may not generalize to other racial/ethnic groups and may not be representative of all youth in the study neighborhoods. The study is also cross-sectional and does not follow youth over time. Thus, we cannot speak to the consequences of self-help for youth over the long run. Future work should also examine the experiences of young women and youth from comparable neighborhoods who have generally not engaged in violent behavior.

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