

In 1995, John DiIulio coined the term “super-predators,” referring to “ever-growing numbers of hardened, remorseless juveniles” who were producing a “burgeoning” crime problem that would be greatest in black inner-city neighborhoods but would also reach upscale urban neighborhoods, the suburbs, and even rural America.

In the years that followed, DiIulio expressed regret over the term itself and admitted the failure of his prediction, as youth crime actually diminished. Looking back, he wished he had focused more on help and prevention and had avoided stigmatizing troubled youth.

In his defense, criminology is not pure science. Forecasting societal trends, though routinely attempted in the social sciences, is extremely complicated and ultimately speculative. Despite failing miserably as a prophet, DiIulio was still a criminologist who knew the data and spoke truth about crime in America.

Politically, DiIulio was a centrist Democrat. Coming from the inner-city of Philadelphia and staying “close to home” as an adult, DiIulio had insights into race and racism like few other criminologists. In his writings about crime, he can come across as alarmist but also as honest and credible and by no means racist, which will be seen in his discussion of black crime below.

John DiIulio on Black Crime

(“My Black Crime Problem, and Ours,” by John J. DiIulio, Jr., *City Journal*, Spring 1996.)

...Growing up in rough-edged, white-ethnic, working-class neighborhoods of Philadelphia in the 1960s and 1970s, I knew—as all the kids I grew up with knew—that when push literally came to shove, the police would be “working for me and not for them.” Each morning on my way to high school, I stood by myself at a bus stop, surrounded mainly by black teenagers from adjacent neighborhoods. I was by myself, but I was not alone. I knew that the cop in the cruiser was looking out for me in case “they” started trouble that I could not handle.

My old neighborhood had its biracial, but strictly segregated, parks and playgrounds. When interracial fights did break out, everyone ran when the cops came. But we white boys knew that if we got caught and showed due deference to the officers (*never* mouth off to a panting cop), we’d get lectured, get our hair pulled, or (at most) get our fathers called. We also knew the black boys would get that and worse—slapped, clubbed, and maybe arrested.

Once when I was unloading 100-pound flour bags at a downtown pizzeria where I worked, the cops came zooming up the sidewalk, got out of their cruiser, and pushed my pal and co-worker, Willie Brown, against the wall. They did not touch me. Willie, an illiterate black man then in his forties, had done nothing. I protested, and the cops sped off as quickly as they had come: “Sorry, kid, we got a call that somebody was stealing.” But the only “somebody” they grabbed was the black man, and the only apology they issued was to the white boy.

I recall the second time my father, a retired deputy sheriff, ran a citywide race for sheriff and appointed me his manager (mainly to teach me something about politics before I “bought whatever they think they know at Harvard”). He ran on a real rainbow-coalition ticket with former deputy mayor Charles Bowser, Philly’s first major black mayoral candidate. We lost the election (no surprise) as well as good relations with some neighbors (sad surprise), one of whom loudly scolded me that “we’ll never be safe from crime if *they’re* in charge of it.”

Even though I am now a card-carrying elite professor and “upper-middle-class white,” I have stayed close to home. I hang out with the same white working-class relatives and friends I’ve known all my life. I live a few minutes by car from some of Philadelphia’s worst black neighborhoods. So I have a very different perspective from that of most white intellectuals, both on the white ethnics who turn into the cops blacks fear and on the everyday reality of life in black communities. And as little as the white policy elites, liberal or conservative, know about “the black experience,” believe me, they know less about what race means in the lives of those Italian-American bricklayers, Irish-American gas pumpers, and Polish-American salesclerks whom the U.S. Census bureaucrats have baptized “non-Hispanic whites.” We need to understand these folks, too—and especially how their experience of black-white relations leaves a tangle of powerful contradictions and ambivalences, as I know vividly from my own experience.

I indelibly remember taking a jump shot on the playground when I was ten. As the ball left my hand, instead of invoking, for luck, the name of a white star (as was customary), I unthinkingly shouted the name of a black star. “Nigger lover!” snapped a scandalized playmate. But the following week, the same kid punched out a white schoolyard bully for bothering a black girl who wandered by. I’ll never forget how much, when my frail grandmother got kicked, punched, and robbed in broad daylight for the third time (on her way to church, no less), the fact that her assailants were (once again) black boys got under my white skin. The memory of the anger is still there—along with the image of her in her hospital bed, imploring her strapping grandsons, some of us cops, to “love all God’s people.”

So it’s no mystery to me that blacks tense when they see a white cop coming: they know the Willie Brown experience well enough, and how could they possibly know the sense of justice regardless of race, even the Christian *caritas* [charity] transcending race, that can lie beneath the blue uniform and the white skin? ...white ambivalence is...familiar territory to me... I grew up with it; I know that casual racism is there; I know the anger and shame you feel at seeing it all around you—and I know the competing anger, no less familiar: the anger at the knowledge that when real violence erupts, all too often the assailants are (once again) black.

Honest blacks know this, too. In a recent issue of *The New Republic*, Boston University economist Glenn Loury writes of inner-city black communities: “‘What manner of people are you who live like this?’ The question is unavoidable... It does no good to say that these are a minority of black persons; that there are good and sufficient reasons for their troubling behaviors; that others, who are not black, have also fallen short.” Of middle-class

blacks, he admits: "We are afraid to go into these communities. We do not recognize these kids as us: the distance is great and difficult to bridge."

My black crime problem, and ours, is that for most Americans, especially for average white Americans, the distance is not merely great but almost unfathomable, the fear is enormous and largely justifiable, and the black kids who inspire the fear seem not merely unrecognizable but alien. Not that we can't understand where they come from, when we stop to consider. After all, the child is father to the man: and think how many inner-city black children are without parents, relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches, or clergymen to teach them right from wrong, give them loving and consistent discipline, show them the moral and material value of hard work and study, and bring them to cherish the self-respect that comes only from respecting the life, liberty, and property of others. Think how many black children grow up where parents neglect and abuse them, where other adults and teenagers harass and harm them, where drug dealers exploit them. Not surprisingly, in return for the favor, some of these children kill, rape, maim, and steal without remorse. And around goes the negative feedback loop: reasonable fear feeds unreasonable white race hostility, whose reality in turn feeds unreasonable black paranoia about the justice system.

Is there anything social science research can do to help dispel all the ambivalence and confusion crowding around the subject of race and crime? At least it can tell the truth, as the data disclose it, about the reality of black crime and black punishment. The bottom line of most of the best research is that America's justice system is *not* racist, not anymore, not as it undoubtedly was only a generation ago—in spite of the Driving While Black experience. If blacks are overrepresented in the ranks of the imprisoned, it is because blacks are overrepresented in the criminal ranks—and the violent criminal ranks, at that. Yes, there are ways in which the justice system is failing all Americans, including black Americans. But to the extent that the justice system hurts, rather than helps, blacks more than it does whites, it is not by incarcerating a "disproportionate" number of young black men. Rather, it is by ignoring poor black victims and letting convicted violent and repeat black criminals, both adult and juvenile, continue to victimize and demoralize the black communities that suffer most of their depredations...