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Whites' Concern about Crime: The Effects of Interracial Contact\*

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## Whites' Concern about Crime: The Effects of Interracial Contact

### Abstract

In recent decades, crime has emerged as a prominent policy focus nationally. Accordingly, a large literature on public views about crime has developed, one strand of which highlights the racialization of crime as a factor central to public opinion and policy discourse. Drawing on this work and studies on the effects of interracial contact, we seek to advance theory and research on public opinion about crime. To this end, we draw on data from an ABC News and Washington Post poll to test competing hypotheses about the effects of interracial friendship among whites on concern about local and national crime. The results suggest that interracial contact increases concern about crime among urban whites. We discuss the implication of these findings for theory, research, and policy.

**KEY WORDS:** crime interracial contact

## Whites' Concern about Crime: The Effects of Interracial Contact

### Introduction

During the 1990s, crime emerged as a top priority among the American public (Romer et al. 2003). Concomitantly, according to some scholars, news and media accounts contributed to what has been termed the “racialization of crime,” wherein race and crime increasingly were conflated with one another (Skogan 1998; Gilliam et al. 2002; Peffley and Hurwitz 2002; Chiricos et al. 2004; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). According to this perspective, such accounts typically have characterized minorities, blacks in particular, as criminals, and, conversely, criminals as minorities. Loury (2002:67) has argued, for example, that blacks suffer from a “spoiled collective identity” in which white society views them negatively and links them to the crime problem in America. The result is, as Soss et al. (2003:400) have argued, that “white Americans tend to associate criminality with people of color and believe that most criminals come from racial minorities.” In turn, such views are held to contribute to policies that disproportionately target minorities and do so because of a perception that crime is out of control and is caused primarily by these groups (Skogan 1998; Chiricos et al. 2004). Indirect support for this argument is reflected in the fact that during the 1990s, the period of time in which racialization of crime was held to be increasingly prominent, punitive crime policies became more common and, according to researchers, were focused disproportionately on minorities (Peffley et al. 1997; Beckett and Sasson 2000; Garland 2001; Roberts et al. 2003; Roberts and Hough 2005b; Western 2006; Pager 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2007a-b; Unnever et al. 2008).

Two fundamental assumptions of this line of reasoning have been that, during this period of time, whites were concerned about crime and the concern was linked to perceptions of blacks (Soss et al. 2003). However, only a handful of studies have investigated this idea directly, and the research to date typically has focused on whites' views of blacks, not their experiences with them (Gilliam et al. 2002; Soss et al. 2003; Chiricos et al. 2004; Unnever and Cullen 2007b). This gap in research is notable because of a large literature on interracial contact and the idea

that it may reduce prejudicial and stereotypical views, and, in turn, lead to more favorable views about racial and ethnic groups different from one's own (Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Quillian 2006). The question remains, however, whether interracial contact has a positive or negative influence on whites' views about crime. That question assumes particular salience not only because of arguments about the racialization of crime but also because of persistent racial divides among social networks in American society (McPherson et al. 2001; Charles 2003; Davis 2005).

The goal of this paper is to contribute efforts to understand the factors that shape public opinion about crime, and, in particular, to understand whether interracial contact increases or decreases whites' concern about crime being a problem. Drawing on different bodies of theoretical and empirical research on public opinion, we develop competing hypotheses about the influence of interracial contact on whites' views about local crime and national crime, respectively, and, why the effects may be more pronounced among urban area residents. We then test these hypotheses using data from a 1997 ABC News and Washington Post (1998) national poll and discuss the implications of the findings for theory, research, and policy.

## Background

Public opinion about crime has received considerable attention from researchers. The attention stems perhaps from the intrinsic interest of the topic. But it also stems from the fact that for most of the public, crime is seen as an important social problem, though the extent of agreement about this perception has varied over time (Warr 1995; Flanagan and Longmire 1996; Cullen et al. 2000; Roberts et al. 2003; Roberts and Hough 2005a-b). Despite the attention, much remains unknown about public opinion toward crime and the factors that influence it.

As several scholars have recently noted (e.g., Mears et al. 2007; Unnever et al. 2007), the bulk of public opinion research on crime tends to be atheoretical, focusing on developing prevalence estimates about various facets of public views or on identifying correlates of these

views (Roberts 1992; Cullen et al. 2000). Exceptions exist, but they tend to focus on specific dimensions of public opinion, such as support for the death penalty (Baumer et al. 2003; Unnever and Cullen 2007b) and punitive sanctioning (Taylor et al. 1979; Chiricos et al. 2004).

One avenue of investigation that has featured prominently in efforts to theoretically explicate public opinion has centered around race (Gilliam et al. 2002; Chiricos et al. 2004; Hogan et al. 2005; Unnever and Cullen 2007b). In the early 1990s, polls established that crime was viewed as the biggest problem in the country (Pettinico 1994; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Roberts and Stalans 1998; Cullen et al. 2000). During this time, violent crime rates peaked, thus seeming to justify the concern. As importantly, crime became increasingly “racialized” in public discourse. That is, “blackness” became equated with criminality (Stinchcombe et al. 1980; Skogan 1998; Gilliam et al. 2002). Chiricos et al. (2004), for example, found that the racial typification of crime—that is, the tendency to “typify crime as a disproportionately black phenomenon” (p. 369)—was positively associated with increased punitiveness. Scholars argue that such effects result from a stereotype of blacks as criminals, a stereotype that is deeply embedded in the American collective conscience and that leads to high levels of fear and prejudice among whites (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Quillian and Pager 2001). Evidence in support of this argument can be found in studies of the media. For example, in their research on media presentations of race, Entman and Rojecki (2000:209) found that “the news presents a face of Black disruption, of criminal victimizing and victimization, that compares unfavorably with Whites.” The authors argued that the effects of such presentations can be profound and difficult to counter. Indeed, in interviews with white respondents, the authors found that “only those who had prolonged personal contact with Blacks in arenas beyond the workplace failed to make comments that touched on the deep-seated fears and anxieties attached to Blacks as a social category” (p. 209).

Fear of blacks, and the equating of blacks with crime, has been examined through different theoretical perspectives, but perhaps the most prominent has been racial threat theory. Emerging from Blalock’s (1967) and others’ work (e.g., Liska 1992), the central argument is that blacks constitute a threat to white majorities, leading whites to take steps to reduce the threat through

increased social control (Stults and Baumer 2007). This argument has found particular resonance in studies of how whites view blacks. As Chiricos et al. (2004) have written: “The presumed link of crime with black men is well established in American culture. . . . It has been argued, however, that since the 1960s . . . it has grown substantially more conspicuous” (p. 362). In turn, that development has contributed to a type of “modern racism” consisting of “a general hostility toward blacks” (Entman 1990:332) and not simply “direct expressions of racial superiority or inferiority” (Chiricos et al. 2004:364; see also Peffley and Hurwitz 2002).

Juxtaposed against this historical context and line of research stands an odd fact: relatively little attention has been given to whether interracial contact influences public views toward crime. The inattention is notable because of racial cleavages in social networks (McPherson et al. 2001) and a large body of work on Allport’s (1954) “contact hypothesis,” which argues that contact with other racial groups—and, in particular, whites’ exposure to blacks—can increase tolerance and understanding (Sigelman and Welch 1993; Powers and Ellison 1995; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Quillian 2006). The results of this research have been largely consistent. In a recent meta-analysis, for example, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) concluded that “intergroup contact can promote reductions in intergroup prejudice,” a finding robust enough to suggest that “there is little need to demonstrate contact’s general ability to lessen prejudice” (p. 768).

A logical extension of these two lines of research is to examine how interracial contact is, if at all, linked to public opinion about crime. The issue has only indirectly been addressed in prior work. To illustrate, Jeffries and Ransford (1969) examined the Los Angeles Watts riot and found that whites who knew blacks tended to hold less punitive views about how to respond to similar riots in the future. More recently, a number of studies have examined whether whites’ proximity to blacks affects their views about crime, with some supporting this assessment (e.g., Gilliam et al. 2002) and others arriving at a different conclusion. Skogan (1998), for example, analyzed General Social Survey (GSS) data and found that whites “who reported that no black people lived nearby were the least fearful, while those living the closest to blacks were the most fearful” (p. 125; see also Liska et al. 1982; Covington and Taylor 1991; Gilliam et al. 2002). As

he noted, the pattern accords with some studies of the contact hypothesis, which find that interracial contact may sometimes fail to achieve the beneficial effect sometimes assumed to flow from it (Skogan 1998:130; see also Dixon et al. 2005:698). Notably, these studies have not directly examined whether *actual* interracial contact influences whites' views of crime.

## Hypotheses

Building off of the above observations, we develop several hypotheses aimed at investigating whether a link between interracial contact and whites' views about crime exists. The focus is restricted to hypotheses about whites' views, given the theoretical logic underlying these hypotheses and the fact that prior research suggests that the meaning and effect of blacks' experiences of interracial contact may differ from that of whites' (Sigelman and Welch 1993; Powers and Ellison 1995; Pettigrew 1998; Davis 2005). We also examine whether any identified effect of interracial contact varies when the focus is on local versus national crime or when it occurs in urban areas. Given prior research on views about crime, especially studies that point to differing views among the public about local and national crime (Warr 1995), the dual local-national focus warrants exploration. At the same time, research on the contact hypothesis finds that whites residing in urban areas may have more contact with "out groups" and for that reason be less likely to hold stereotypical views about blacks (Dixon 2006). At the same time, public opinion research tends to find that urban residents report greater levels of fear as well as greater support for "get tough" punishment (Miethé 1995; Haghighi and Sorensen 1996; Chiricos et al. 1997; Skogan 1998; Romer et al. 2003; Unnever et al. 2007).

*Hypothesis 1. The effects of interracial contact will lower whites' concern about crime being a problem.* This hypothesis stems from theoretical perspectives and research indicating that interracial contact reduces stereotypical views of minorities, and from studies highlighting the pronounced racialization of crime that has occurred in recent decades, especially during the 1990s, when media accounts and policy debates frequently equated race and crime (Gilliam et al.



2002; Gallagher 2003; Chiricos et al. 2004; Hogan et al. 2005; Pager 2007). Congruent with the logic of the contact hypothesis, the underlying assumption is that close association with blacks will reduce stereotypical views of blacks as being criminal and, by extension, reduce the racialization of crime and thus perceptions of crime as being a prominent problem.

The competing argument is that whites who have close black friends will be more, not less, concerned about crime being a problem. First, friendships with blacks may increase stereotypical views of them, an effect anticipated by scholarship, dating back to Allport (1954), on the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew 1998; Dixon et al. 2005; Quillian 2006; O'Brien and Korgen 2007), by some studies of the effects of residential integration on whites' views about blacks and crime (Skogan 1998), and by racial threat theories, which argue that proximity and exposure to blacks may increase stereotypes and prejudice (Gilliam et al. 2002; Soss et al. 2003; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004). The second reason involves what may be termed an "education" effect. Blacks typically are exposed to more, and more serious, crime (Alba et al. 1994; Charles 2003), and they have more contact—whether due to greater offending, victimization, or greater policing—with law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Sampson and Lauritsen 1998). The sum result is that whites who have close black friends may, by dint of this relationship, become educated about the greater amount of crime that blacks commit or experience, which in turn may increase their concern that crime is a problem.

*Hypothesis 2. The effects of interracial contact on whites' concern about crime will be greater when the focus is on local rather than national crime.* Although there is little strong theoretical basis to anticipate such an effect, prior research indicates that public views about local and national crime differ (Romer et al. 2003). For example, Warr (1995) has noted that the public typically holds a more favorable view about crime locally. After reviewing poll trends in the United States, he observed: "In each year there is nearly unanimous agreement that crime is increasing in this country" (p. 298), then, "Americans, however, are much less pessimistic about crime trends in their own area" (p. 299). In a similar vein, some theoretical accounts emphasize the idea that community context shapes individuals' perceptions of the salience of crime (Taylor

et al. 1979; cf. McIntyre 1967). To the extent that this observation holds true, it stands to reason that individuals distinguish between their immediate social context and that of the country as a whole. In such a context, should interracial contact influence whites' views about crime, and, in particular, the relationship between race and crime, the effect may be more pronounced when the focus is on local crime, since the contact typically will occur locally (see Heath 1984).

Once, again, a competing argument can be stated: the effects of interracial contact on whites' concern about crime may be greater when the focus is on national rather than local crime. This hypothesis adopts the opposite logic. To wit, since the public tends to express greater concern about crime nationally, it may be that factors that influence perceptions of crime have greater salience for individuals' perceptions of crime as a problem nationally.

*Hypothesis 3. The effects of interracial contact on whites' concern about crime will be greater among whites who reside in urban areas.* This hypothesis stems in part from calls to investigate how racial effects may be moderated by other factors (Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004:258; Unnever and Cullen 2007a:125). Researchers have found that “negative stereotypes of blacks are significantly greater in metropolitan areas . . . in which there are larger concentrations of minorities” (Dixon 2006:2181; see also Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004:260). Juxtaposed against such research are studies showing that crime typically is higher in urban areas (Weisheit and Donnermeyer 2000). Perhaps not surprising, given that pattern, studies also have found that residents in urbanized areas are more likely to fear crime and support punitive responses to it (Miethe 1995; Haghighi and Sorensen 1996; Chiricos et al. 1997; Skogan 1998; Romer et al. 2003; Unnever et al. 2007). Such work underscores the notion that crime may be more salient to individuals who reside in urban areas. For that reason, factors, such as interracial contact, that may influence views about crime may exert a greater effect in such areas. We speculate that this possibility is especially likely for interracial contact that occurs in periods where crime is racialized and also is “an inescapable fact of modern life” for minorities (Miethe 1995:27). In short, if interracial contact influences whites' concern about crime, we expect the effect to be more pronounced among whites who live in urban areas.

## Data and Methods

The data for this study come from the ABC News/Washington Post (1998) Race and Crime Poll, which involved the random selection of adult respondents nationally to participate in telephone-based interviews in June 1997 (N=1,137).<sup>1</sup> The poll focused on race relations in the United States. Of particular relevance for this study is the fact that the data provide measures of crime as a problem locally and nationally and as well as a measure of interracial friendship. These measures were collected at a time when crime was one of the most important problems listed by the public in opinion polls (Warr 1995) and, of particular relevance for this study, when the racialization of crime was an especially prominent phenomenon (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Gilliam et al. 2002; Chiricos et al. 2004). They thus afford a unique opportunity to investigate the salience of interracial friendship to perceptions about crime as a problem and whether any association between the two varies when the focus is on crime nationally rather than locally. The data also include information about whether respondents resided in urban areas, thereby allowing an exploration of whether interracial friendship effects vary by residential location. Not least, the poll collected data on the social and demographic characteristics of respondents as well as whether respondents were victims of crime. For these items, question wording and response options, described below, paralleled those of similar items in studies of public opinion and crime (Roberts 1992; Roberts and Stalans 1998; Cullen et al. 2000; Roberts et al. 2003; Roberts and Hough 2005a-b; Mears et al. 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2007b).

Because of our theoretical focus, we focus only on white respondents. In the survey, respondents were asked, “Are you of Hispanic origin or background?” If they responded “yes,” respondents then were asked, “Are you a white Hispanic or black Hispanic?” If no, respondents were asked, “Are you white, black, or some other race?” In this study, we include those respondents who reported that they were non-Hispanic white respondents. The larger sample consists of 1,137 individuals, of whom 71.2 percent (N=810) were non-Hispanic whites.

Insert table 1 about here

### Dependent Variables

Two measures of concern about crime are used as dependent variables, one focused on crime locally and the other focused on crime nationally. For crime locally, respondents were asked: “How would you rate the crime problem in your own community where you live?” Response categories were “1=not bad at all,” “2=not too bad,” “3=bad,” and “4=very bad.” For crime nationally, the same response categories were used but respondents were asked: “How would you rate the crime problem in this country?” We focus on concern about crime as a general measure of the salience that crime has for individuals. A primary virtue of this measure is that it is similar or identical to ones used in prior research (see, e.g., Chiricos et al. 2004:370-371; see also Heath 1984; Romer et al. 2003; Dixon 2008).

### Independent Variable

The primary independent variable of interest is interracial friendship. In the poll, white respondents were asked, “Do you yourself know any black person whom you consider a fairly close personal friend?” Response categories were “1=yes” and “0=no.” As shown in table 1, 72 percent of whites responded “yes” to this question, a response rate that falls within the range typically found in other studies that use a similar question (Dixon 2006:2187). Strategically, this question is especially useful for the present study because it measures “fairly close” friendships. It thus accords with the contact perspectives that emphasize that “contact should be evaluated as ‘important’ to the participants involved” (Dixon et al. 2005:699; see also Dixon 2006:2180), and, in turn, better taps into the possibility that a contact effect, should one exist, can be detected (Pettigrew 1998:76). In addition, it, too, is similar to measures of friendship that have been used in prior contact studies (e.g., Sigelman and Welch 1993; Powers and Ellison 1995; Dixon 2006).

## Control Variables

We include controls typically used in research on public opinion about crime and justice (see, e.g., Cullen et al. 1998; Sprott 1999; Moon et al. 2000; Chiricos et al. 2004; Sims and Johnston 2004; Mears et al. 2007; Unnever et al. 2007). As summarized in table 1, the controls consist of age, sex, education, income, political ideology, residential location, and victimization. One variable, residential location, is included not only as a control but also as a variable that, in interactional analyses, is anticipated to amplify the effects of interracial friendship.

Age is coded in the following manner (percentages of respondents falling in category are provided parenthetically): “1=18-29” (15.3 percent), “2=30-39” (23.8 percent), “3=40-49” (20.2 percent), “4=50-59” (13.8 percent), and “5=60 and older” (26.4 percent). Sex was coded as “1=male” and “0=female.” Forty-six percent of the respondents were male and 54 percent were female. We include no control for race because our focus is on white respondents.

Education is measured by using responses to the question, “What was the last grade of school you completed?” To reduce the number of categories and to have a measure that more closely corresponds to those used in prior research, we use the following coding: “1=some high school or less,” “2=high school graduate,” “3=some college,” “4=college graduate,” and “5=some post-graduate education or post-graduate degree.” Eight (7.7) percent of respondents indicated they had less than a high school education, 37.0 percent reported they had graduated high school, 20.7 percent had some college experience, 23.1 percent had earned a college degree, and 11.2 percent of respondents had worked toward or had earned a post-graduate degree.

Income is measured by combining information from several questions. Respondents were first asked, “If you added together the yearly incomes, before taxes, of all the members of your household for last year, 1996, would the total be less than \$30,000 or more than \$30,000?” If respondents chose “more than \$30,000,” they then were given the following categories from which to select as best matching their household income: \$30,000 but less than \$50,000, \$50,000 but less than \$75,000, or more than \$75,000. From these two sets of questions, we

created four income categories (percentage responses are included parenthetically): “1=less than \$30,000” (27.8 percent), “2=\$30,000 to \$49,000” (28.4 percent), “3=\$50,000 to \$74,000” (19.1 percent), and “4=\$75,000 or more” (16.7 percent).

To evaluate respondents’ political orientations, the poll included the following question: “Would you say your views in most political matters are very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, or very conservative?” Following the lead of others (Chiricos et al. 2004; Unnever et al. 2008), we coded the variable as “1= very conservative or conservative” or “0=other.” Thirty-two percent of respondents described themselves as very conservative or conservative.<sup>2</sup>

To tap into prior victimization, respondents were asked, “In the last year, have you or any member of your immediate family been the victim of a crime?” This measure is coded “1=yes” and “0=no.” Twenty percent of respondents reported being a victim of crime.

Finally, residential location, or “urban,” is measured using responses to the question, “Would you describe the area in which you live as a large city, suburb of a large city, small town, or rural area?” Here, again, following the lead of prior studies (e.g., Chiricos et al. 1997; Jacobson and Johnson 2006; Johnson 2008), we coded this variable as “1=urban” or “0=other.” Fifteen percent of the sample reported residing in an urban area. This coding also reflected the expectation that any identified interaction effects with interracial contact would stem from differences in racial dynamics and crime in urban versus non-urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

### Analyses

We present two sets of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to test the hypotheses. (We repeated the analyses using ordinal logistic regression, and the results were largely the same, both statistically and substantively.) The first set examines whites’ concern about crime locally and the second examines their concern about crime nationally. In each case, we proceed sequentially. The first model regresses the concern measures on black friendship (i.e., whether a white respondent reported having a close friend who was black). The second model includes the

controls to determine if the estimated effect of black friendship is altered in any way. And the third model tests for an interaction between the friendship and urban measures.

## Findings

Before proceeding to tests of our hypotheses, we turn first to the two dependent variables. Inspection of table 1 shows that the mean for concern about crime locally was 2.1 and, for concern about crime nationally, was 3.3. Recall that the scale runs from “1=not bad at all” to “4=very bad.” A value of 2.1 thus indicates that, on average, white respondents think that the crime problem locally is “not too bad.” By contrast, a value of 3.3 indicates that the respondents think that the crime problem nationally is, at a minimum, “bad.” The greater level of concern about crime nationally accords with findings from previous studies, which typically show that the public tends to view crime as a larger problem nationally than locally. It also underscores that the two types of crime problems are not viewed the same by respondents and thus that factors that are associated with one may not necessarily be associated with the other.

Insert table 2 about here

We now turn to the test of whether white respondents with at least one close friend who is black are more likely or less likely to be concerned about crime locally. Examination of model 1 in table 2 reveals that the relationship is statistically significant and positive, indicating that whites with black friends are more likely than those without such friends to be concerned about local crime. Much the same effect emerges when the focus is on crime nationally, as seen in model 1 in table 3. In short, interracial contact among whites clearly is associated with an increased likelihood of viewing crime as a local and national problem, and the effect is largely similar regardless of whether the focus is on crime locally or nationally.

Insert table 3 about here

Model 2 in both tables 2 and 3 includes controls that, if omitted, might result in a spurious assessment of an association between interracial contact and concern about crime. In table 2, inclusion of the controls slightly alters the estimated effect of having a black friend, with the coefficient decreasing from .18 in model 1 to .15 in model 2. In table 3, the estimated effect is largely the same—specifically, the coefficient is .16 in models 1 and 2. Although not a primary focus of this paper, the relative effect of interracial contact is non-trivial relative to the other variables in the tables.<sup>4</sup> It also bears mention that the effects of the control variables largely comport with prior research, though in some cases the literature is mixed.<sup>5</sup>

We next turn to the question of whether the effect of interracial contact is amplified if a respondent resides in an urban location. Both when the focus is on crime locally and when it is on crime nationally, the answer appears to be, “yes,” as reflected by the statistically significant interaction term—black friendship x urban—in model 3 in both tables 2 and 3. To facilitate discussion of this effect, figure 1 provides a graphical depiction of the results, obtained by setting the friendship and urban variables at different values while setting the covariates at their means.

Insert figure 1 about here

Focusing first on concern about crime locally, we can see that, among whites residing in urban areas, those with close black friends were considerably more concerned about crime than those with no close black friends. Observe, for example, the difference in the first two bars. The predicted value for white respondents with no close black friends is 1.9, while the predicted value for white respondents with at least one close black friend is 2.6—a 35 percent increase in concern about local crime.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, among respondents residing in non-urban areas, there was little substantive effect of having a close black friend. Specifically, the increase in predicted value went from 1.9 to 2.0, a 5 percent increase.

A largely similar pattern emerges when the focus is on crime nationally. Here, again, among whites living in urban areas, those who reported having a close black friend expressed



substantially more concern about crime nationally as compared with whites who had no close black friends, as reflected in the predicted values (3.5 and 2.8, respectively). By contrast, and similar to the pattern when the focus was on local crime, there is little effect of interracial contact among whites residing in non-urban areas. That is, both groups expressed largely similar views about the crime problem nationally. Specifically, whites in such areas who had black friends had a predicted concern-about-crime value of 3.3, compared with a predicted value of 3.2 among whites in non-urban areas who did not have black friends.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to contribute to efforts to understand the factors that influence public opinion about crime and how interracial contact may contribute to whites' views about crime. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Warr 1995), we found that whites were more likely to view crime nationally as a substantially greater problem than crime locally. However, we found little evidence that the hypothesized effects varied when the focus was on national versus local crime. With respect to our main focus, we found that whites with close black friends were more likely to be concerned about crime, suggesting support for the notion that such contact activates processes, such as stereotyping or educating individuals about crime and victimization risks, that leads to increased concern. The estimated effects remained largely the same after controlling for a range of factors, including prior victimization. We also found that whites residing in urban areas were substantially more likely to be concerned about crime if they had a close friend who was black, whereas whites in non-urban areas were largely unaffected by such friendships.

The results here fit squarely within a larger body of research on the contact hypothesis that establishes the nuanced character of interracial contact and the fact that its effects should not be assumed to result inevitably in more favorable attitudes and beliefs about a range of race-related issues (Soss et al. 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Quillian 2006). Of particular relevance for criminological theory is the possibility that "racial threat" effects identified in the literature may

arise in part *because* of interracial contact, not the absence of it (Gilliam et al. 2002; Chiricos et al. 2004; Hogan et al. 2005). That is, it may be that such contact does not ameliorate a sense of threat but actually causes or amplifies it. This possibility, anticipated by some versions of the contact hypothesis (Dixon 2006; O'Brien and Korgen 2007), is relevant because one of the central ideas underpinning racial threat arguments is that minorities, blacks in particular, constitute an unknown "other" to which stereotypes can easily be attached (Quillian 2006; Dixon 2008). If so, increased contact presumably should reduce social distance and lessen the perception of "otherness." However, it may be that such contact instead reinforces whites' stereotypes and perceptions of minorities, and blacks in particular, as more criminal (Soss et al. 2003; Dixon 2008). It also may be that exposure to minorities creates an awareness among whites that crime is more pervasive than they otherwise would believe. That possibility is rendered more plausible by the fact that crime is a "fact of life" for urban minorities (Miethe 1995:27) more so than for urban whites (Alba et al. 1994:427). It thus is conceivable that association with blacks educates whites about crime in general or in their community.

The question remains as to whether the identified effect stems from a stereotyping or educative process. The contact literature clearly establishes that close friendship should in general reduce stereotypes and generate greater understanding of the conditions and problems blacks face (Dixon 2006; Henry and Hardin 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). It seems unlikely, then, that the effect of having close black friends is to reinforce racial stereotypes of blacks as criminals and thus to elevate concerns about crime (Sigelman and Welch 1993). This speculation is supported in part by research showing that the "link between residential proximity and fear persists *despite the fact that whites living close to blacks register lower levels of prejudice than do those who are more distant*" (Skogan 1995:70; emphasis added). We suspect, therefore, that the more likely pathway is that urban whites are led, by dint of their friendships with blacks, to understand how much crime occurs in their community or how much crime blacks in their community face, either of which may contribute to a greater concern about crime (see Stinchcombe et al. 1980; Alba et al. 1994; Skogan 1995).

These comments notwithstanding, we submit that it is at least plausible that close interracial friendships may activate or enhance certain specific stereotypes that whites hold. To illustrate, in a recent study, Dixon (2008:117) examined how news content influenced perceptions respondents held about blacks as criminals and found that “exposure to Blacks’ overrepresentation as criminals on local news programming was positively related to the perception of Blacks as violent.” He argued that “news viewing may be part of a process that makes the construct or cognitive linkage between Blacks and criminality frequently activated and therefore chronically accessible” and that “each instance of exposure to a Black criminal activates the stereotype of Black criminality, strengthening the cognitive association between Blacks and crime” (p. 107). By extension, close friendships with blacks may produce reductions in a variety of stereotypes and yet activate, reinforce, or amplify stereotypes about blacks as criminals, especially in settings where media accounts reinforce such associations. For example, Entman and Rojecki (2000) have examined the ways in which media representations of race contribute to what they term “false cognitions,” which occur when events, such as crimes by blacks, are presented as prototypes, ones that in turn reinforce notions among white audiences that blacks are, as a group, criminals. This possibility, the authors emphasized, is more likely in a “culture with a long history and continuing residue of racist suspicion” (p. 214).

In short, interracial contact may increase concern about crime by activating stereotypes that whites hold and that are reinforced in media accounts. By contrast, urban whites who do not have close black friends may hold stereotypes that are not as frequently activated and so register lower levels of concern about crime. We believe this pathway is the less likely one, but ultimately research is needed that can identify which one accounts for the observed relationship between interracial contact and urban whites’ concern about crime. Such research holds the promise of not only explicating that relationship but also of, more generally, illuminating the “black box” of what exactly occurs to individuals’ attitudes and beliefs as a result of interracial contact (Dixon 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

Of course, it may be the case that interracial contact has diverse effects on whites’ views

about crime, with the effect varying according to the settings, frequency, and quality of the contact (Sigelman and Welch 1993; Gilliam et al. 2002; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Sampson and Raudenbush 2005; Dixon 2006). That would accord with interracial contact research, which finds that whether contact reduces stereotypes or prejudices depends on such factors. The findings here of a conditioning effect of urban environment on the influence of contact underscores this possibility. It is, however, but one possibility of many. For example, infrequent contact that is restricted to work settings might increase racial stereotypes that whites may hold, whereas in social or recreational settings, or situations where the contact involves close friendships, contact may decrease such stereotypes, and, in turn, perceptions about crime. The levels of integration and the actual amount of crime in a given area may also be factors that influence the effect of interracial contact (Skogan 1995; Sampson and Raudenbush 2005). Indeed, as discussed, one possible explanation for the findings here is that whites who live in urban areas and who have close black friends are, by extension, more likely to live in higher-crime neighborhoods (Alba et al. 1994; Skogan 1995). Thus, it may not be the case that interracial contact increases whites' concern about crime; rather, greater contact and concern about crime may stem from the greater proximity to areas where both crime and blacks are more prevalent (Stinchcombe et al. 1980). We included a measure of past-year victimization to address this issue, but better measures would include actual crime rates and individuals' perceptions about rates of crime and their proximity to blacks (Skogan 1995; Gray et al. 2008).

## Conclusion

This study underscores the potential role that interracial contact plays in whites' views about crime, and especially the possibility that among urban whites such contact may increase concern about crime. At the same time, it underscores the importance of developing more nuanced measures of contact and including information about the settings in which it occurs. For example, we relied on single-item measures of concern about crime and of interracial contact. It

is possible that the results may have varied if other measures were used. For example, Gray et al. (2008) recently found that individuals may give different responses if traditional fear of crime questions are modified to include such dimensions as the intensity and frequency of fear or worry and if the questions reference specific types of crimes. In a related vein, Heath (1984) found that responses vary when individuals are asked about crime in their neighborhood versus crime in their city and that certain factors may be more associated with one than the other.

Similar nuances may emerge with varied measures of interracial contact. We followed the lead of prior work, which indicates that the quality of interracial contact—close friendships in particular (Sigelman and Welch 1993; Powers and Ellison 1995; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006)—can be especially consequential for affecting whites' views about other racial and ethnic groups (Pettigrew 1998; Dixon 2006). However, measures that capture a range of relationships and the range and intensity of contacts might yield different results. More generally, and as Pettigrew and Tropp (2006:752) have emphasized, the “characteristics of the contact setting, the groups under study, and the individuals involved may all contribute to enhancing or inhibiting contact's effects.” To the extent that contact effects are contingent on or moderated by such factors, future studies would want to include them. In addition, such studies may want to investigate the extent to which interracial contact exerts differential effects along a range of social and demographic dimensions (e.g., age, sex, income, religion, political ideology).

The present study highlights the need for closer scrutiny of the perceptual changes that occur when whites develop close friendships with blacks, the process through which crime becomes “racialized,” and whether interracial contact has differential effects depending on whether it occurs during times or eras in which crime is more racialized or less racialized. For example, it is possible that interracial contact reinforces whites' negative stereotypes about blacks and leads to increased concern about crime and support for tougher crime control approaches, especially those that target putative minority threat groups. However, it also is possible that such contact increases perceptions of crime as being a problem confronting whites and blacks alike and that is not attributable to blacks. In this case, whites' concern about crime and support for tougher

crime control would not indicate support for a racial or symbolic threat argument. Rather, it would suggest a more benevolent situation, one in which whites support efforts to reduce a crime problem that they view as affecting whites and blacks alike. The present study lacked the measures necessary for testing such possibilities, but they are precisely what is needed to illuminate the spectrum of perceptual and attitudinal changes that occur as a result of interracial contact. On this latter front, it bears emphasizing that, in public opinion studies, even when the public supports increasingly punitive punishments they also express support for a range of more “liberal,” rehabilitative measures (Cullen et al. 2000). Thus, studies that examine whites’ views about crime and how to respond to it ideally would involve reference to a spectrum of orientations, not simply punitive or “get tough” ones, and how these change in response to various types of contact with minorities (Unnever 2008).

One other avenue of research that merits pursuit is the extent to which whites’ views about crimes are affected by the stereotypes they hold, their local experiences with blacks, and how both may be affected by differences in how blacks are represented in local versus national media accounts. Peffley et al. (1997:30), for example, found that “whites with strongly negative perceptions of blacks respond quite favorably to them when confronted with individuating information that clearly contradicts their stereotype.” That suggests that pre-existing stereotypes may condition the effect of various types of interracial contact on the stereotypes, including views about putative links between violence and blacks and crime generally. These in turn may be influenced by media depictions of crime. For example, Heath (1984:275) found that “reports of bizarre, violent crimes are frightening if the crime occurred locally” and that “reports of [local] crimes that lack rhyme or reason are frightening.” One question thus is whether whites who have close friendships with blacks hold different views about crime depending on whether local crime accounts depict instances of blacks committing crimes that are worse than those committed by blacks discussed in national news accounts.

One limitation of this study that bears emphasis, and that is common to much of the literature on contact effects (Powers and Ellison 1995; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), is that we lacked the

ability to determine whether the relationship between interracial contact and concern about crime is causal. It also is possible that the observed relationship in the study is understated. For example, it may be that urban whites who are concerned about crime may go out of their way to avoid close contact with blacks. If true, it would reduce the estimated positive effect of having a close black friend on urban whites' concern about crime. Ultimately, resolving such problems requires longitudinal or experimental data or the availability of suitable instrumental variables, as well as better understanding of the factors that contribute to interracial friendships (Jackman and Crane 1986; Powers and Ellison 1995; McPherson et al. 2001; Briggs 2007).

In closing, the findings here suggest caution in drawing policy inferences about ways in which the racialization of crime might be reduced. Among other things, it is not necessarily the case that public views influence policy (Flanagan and Longmire 1996; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Burstein 1998, 2003; Beckett and Sasson 2000; Roberts et al. 2003). That said, and as Roberts (1992:128) has emphasized, it is important to study public opinion "because the views of the public increasingly are cited as a factor in determining criminal justice policies." There seems to be substantial evidence that perceptions of crime are, indeed, highly racialized in media and other accounts (Skogan 1998; Beckett and Sasson 2000; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Gilliam et al. 2002; Hogan et al. 2005; Pager 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2007b). In addition, evidence clearly indicates that racial stereotypes about blacks as "offenders" are ubiquitous and that, among whites, they are easily triggered (Peffley and Hurwitz 2002; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). Evidence clearly points, as well, to a substantial racial divide that remains in American society (McPherson et al. 2001; Quillian 2006; Unnever 2008). In a context in which whites hold more economic and social power (Western 2006), such divides become an important basis of concern, especially if they translate into sanctioning policies that disproportionately affect minorities (Pager 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2007b; Unnever et al. 2008). At the same time, it remains unclear what exactly drives whites' views about crime and how perceptions of and experiences with minorities inform their views. In an era of mass incarceration that has had substantial impacts on minority populations and communities, the time is ripe to investigate this issue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Poll codebook did not include mention of the response rate. Several considerations lead us, however, to believe that the data warrant use. First, the Post and ABC News polls have been conducted regularly for decades and are archived at the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research. They thus have been open to scrutiny and subject to refinement for many years (Langer 2008). Second, the response rates achieved in the polls are comparable to those in well-conducted polls used in many published studies (see, e.g., McCorkle 1993; Cullen et al. 1998; Moon et al. 2000). Third, many studies indicate that such response rates in polls similar to those conducted by ABC News do not typically introduce bias (Keeter, Miller, et al. 2000; Keeter, Kennedy, et al. 2006; Langer 2008). Fourth, the data from the poll series have been used in other studies (e.g., Sigelman and Welch 1993; Shaeffer et al. 2005). Finally, our review uncovered little theoretical or empirical basis for anticipating that factors related to the response rate would bias any estimated effect of interracial contact on whites' views about crime.

<sup>2</sup> In ancillary analyses, available upon request, we re-ran all analyses using the full five-category version of the ideology variable. The results for this variable, as well as those of our main variable of interest, interracial contact, were largely the same statistically and substantively.

<sup>3</sup> In ancillary analyses, available upon request, we re-ran all analyses using the three-category version of the residential location variable. The statistical and substantive results were almost identical. Because we were focused on the interaction of residential location with interracial contact, we ran analyses using dummy variables (urban, suburban, rural), omitting, in one model, suburban, and in another model, rural. We also investigated whether separate interactional analyses (urban x contact, suburban x contact, rural x contact) yielded different results. In every instance, the analyses paralleled those using the urban/non-urban measure. That is, the salient differences emerged when the focus was on urban versus non-urban residents, irrespective of whether the non-urban residents lived in suburban or rural communities.

<sup>4</sup> Inspection of the standardized coefficients, available upon request, indicated that the effect



of interracial contact relative to the other variables was not appreciably different in magnitude from what is apparent from comparison of the unstandardized coefficients.

<sup>5</sup> Older respondents typically report greater concern or fear about crime, which is the case in this study in the local model; even so, some studies have identified an opposite effect (LaGrange and Ferraro 1989). Similarly, women typically express more fear, which is the case in this study in the national model. Education and income have been linked to concern about crime, though the association is not consistently found (Schafer et al. 2006); in our analyses, only income, in the local model, was statistically significant. Political conservatism has consistently been linked to punitive attitudes but its links to views about crime are less consistent, although Unnever et al. (2007:313) have noted that “conservative attitudes may be related to a heightened sense of vulnerability”; in the present study, conservatives were more concerned about crime nationally. Victimization has been linked to fear of crime, but the size of the effect varies (Chiricos et al. 2000; Schafer 2006); in the present study, the effect was positive and large relative to the other variables. Notably, the effects of some of the controls differed in the local (table 2) and national (table 3) models. Sex, for example, was not statistically significant in the local model but it was significant in the national model, and income was significant in the local model but is not in the national model. The differences highlight in part the importance of investigating how public opinion—and, in particular, the influence of such factors as interracial contact on public opinion—may vary depending on whether the focus is on crime locally or nationally.

<sup>6</sup> At the suggestion of a reviewer, we explored whether there were differences across the covariates among urban whites who had black friends and those who did not. No statistically significant differences surfaced, which may reflect the fact that we were unable to include measures of factors found to contribute to interracial friendships among whites, such as living near minorities, residing in metropolitan areas with larger minority populations, participating in religious and civic groups and racially diverse organizations, socializing with co-workers (see McPherson et al. 2001; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Briggs 2007; Fischer 2008).

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**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, White Respondents**

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	Mean	S.D.
<i>Dependent Variables</i>		
Crime problem locally (1=not bad at all, 4=very bad)	2.07	0.85
Crime problem nationally (1=not bad at all, 4=very bad)	3.31	0.69
<i>Independent Variable</i>		
Black friend (1=close personal friend who is black, 0=not)	0.72	0.45
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Age (1=18-29, 2=30-39, . . . , 5=60+)	3.12	1.43
Sex (1=male, 0=female)	0.46	0.50
Education (1=less than H.S., . . . , 5=post-grad.)	2.93	1.16
Income (1=less than \$30K, . . . , 4=\$75K+)	2.27	1.08
Political ideology (1=conservative, 0=other)	0.32	0.47
Victimization (1=victimized, 0=not victimized)	0.20	0.40
Urban (1=urban, 0=other)	0.15	0.35

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**Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Whites' Concern about Crime Locally on Black Friendship**

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	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	1.94*** (0.06)	1.80*** (0.13)	1.84*** (0.13)
Black friendship	0.18** (0.07)	0.15* (0.07)	0.10 (0.07)
Age	—	0.06** (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)
Sex	—	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)
Education	—	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Income	—	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)
Political ideology	—	0.09 (0.07)	0.10 (0.07)
Victimization	—	0.27*** (0.08)	0.27*** (0.08)
Urban	—	0.48*** (0.09)	-0.01 (0.21)
Black friendship x urban	—	—	0.59* (0.23)
Adjusted R2	0.01	0.07	0.08

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\*  $p \leq .05$     \*\*  $p \leq .01$     \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) are presented.

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**Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Whites' Concern about Crime Nationally on Black Friendship**

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	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	3.20*** (0.05)	3.32*** (0.11)	3.36*** (0.11)
Black friendship	0.16** (0.05)	0.16** (0.06)	0.11 (0.06)
Age	—	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Sex	—	-0.25*** (0.05)	-0.24*** (0.05)
Education	—	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
Income	—	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)
Political ideology	—	0.16** (0.05)	0.16** (0.05)
Victimization	—	0.25*** (0.06)	0.25*** (0.06)
Urban	—	0.05 (0.07)	-0.42* (0.17)
Black friendship x urban	—	—	0.57** (0.19)
Adjusted R2	0.01	0.07	0.08

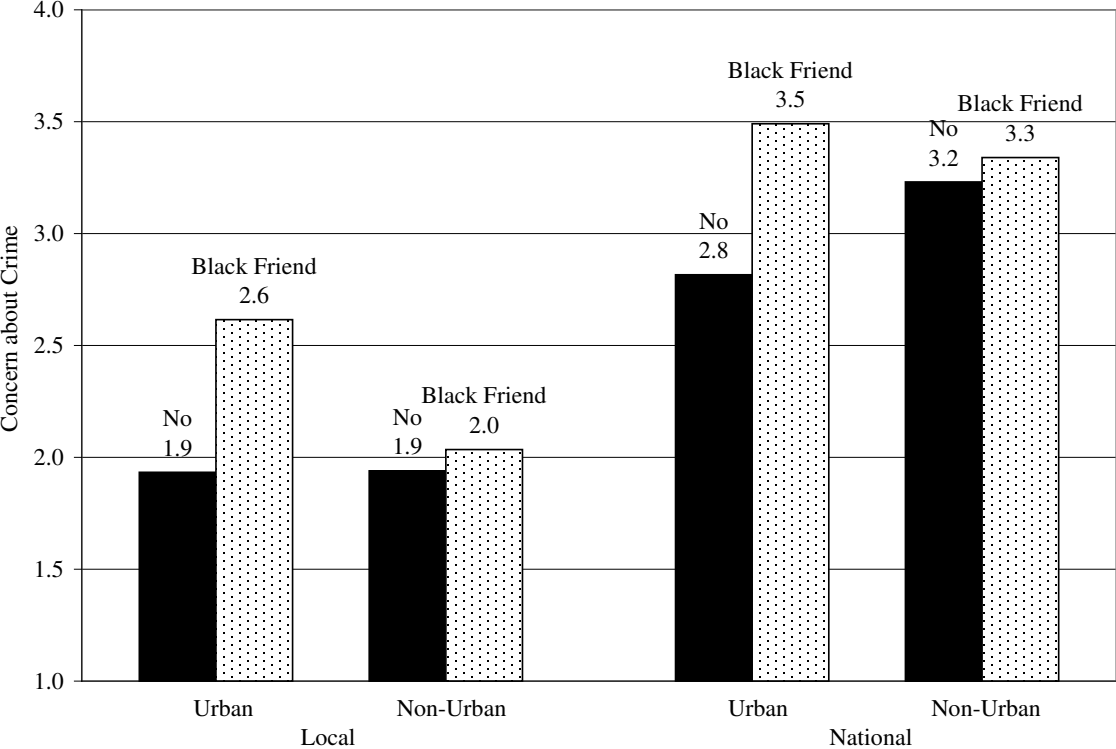
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\*  $p \leq .05$     \*\*  $p \leq .01$     \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) are presented.

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**Figure 1. Concern about Crime Locally and Nationally among Whites: The Interaction of Black Friendship and Urban Location**



Note: Predicted values from model 3, tables 2 and 3, setting all controls at their means. Concern about crime (1=not bad at all, 4=very bad).