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**The Effect of Interracial Contact on  
Whites' Perceptions of Victimization Risk and Black Criminality\***

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## **The Effect of Interracial Contact on Whites' Perceptions of Victimization Risk and Black Criminality**

### **ABSTRACT**

Objectives. This paper examines two questions. First, does interracial contact increase or decrease whites' perceptions of blacks' criminality? Second, does it affect whites' perceived victimization risk, and, if so, is the effect mediated by the perceived criminality of blacks as compared to the perceived criminality of different racial and ethnic groups?

Methods. Multivariate regression analyses of data from a national public opinion poll that included measures of perceived victimization risk and the criminality of whites and Latinos.

Results. Interracial contact increases whites' perceptions of the criminality of all racial and ethnic groups, not just blacks. It also increases whites' perceived risk of victimization, an effect that partially arises by increasing their perception of whites and Latinos, and not just blacks, as criminal.

Conclusions. Although the identified effects may be due to whites' stereotypes about blacks, they are equally consistent with the notion that interracial contact may educate whites about crime. Unfortunately, the present study could not investigate this possibility. Future research ideally will address this limitation, use additional measures of contact, and assess other explanations for any identified effects.

Key words: interracial contact victimization risk

## INTRODUCTION

In America, the stereotyping of blacks as criminals dates back to at least the 19th century (Hawkins 1995; Kennedy 1997). Recent decades, however, have witnessed an unprecedented racialization of crime by politicians and the media that has served to reaffirm and strengthen the view that race is related to the propensity to offend (Barlow 1998; Beckett and Sasson 2000; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Welch 2007). Indeed, many scholars have suggested that crime and race have become so inextricably intertwined in media accounts, policy discussions, and public discourse as to create the view that blackness and crime are synonymous (Skogan 1998; Gilliam et al. 2002; Quillian and Pager 2001, 2010; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010). This phenomenon, what some scholars have referred to as the racial typification of crime (Chiricos et al. 2004), occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, crime became more salient to policy debates (Garland 2001; Gottschalk 2006) and incarceration rates and “get tough” criminal justice policies increased (Blumstein and Wallman 2006; Klaus 2007; Pratt 2009; Truman and Rand 2010), with what many scholars have argued has had a disproportionate impact on blacks (Western 2006; Hagan 2010). Against that backdrop, the equating of crime and race assumes particular importance—it is a phenomenon that arose in a context of large-scale, mass incarceration, pronounced concern about crime, and ongoing political dialogue that consistently placed black Americans at the center of discussions about critical social problems, including not only crime but also welfare (Beckett and Sasson 2000; Travis 2005; Hagan 2010).

The racialization of crime created a situation, according to scholars, in which white Americans have tended “to associate criminality with people of color and believe that most criminals come from racial minorities” (Soss et al. 2003:400). The result, Loury (2002:67) has suggested, is a “spoiled collective identity” that leads whites to view blacks disparagingly and to see them as not only criminal but also as a primary cause of crime in America. This line of reasoning dovetails with minority threat arguments that anticipate increased social control efforts by the majority group aimed at maintaining their social position in periods when their political or

economic power are under siege (Blalock 1967; Liska 1992). And it accords with the ascendance of “get tough,” punitive crime policies in recent years that scholars have argued target minorities, blacks in particular (Beckett and Sasson 2000; Garland 2001; Roberts and Hough 2005; Western 2006; Pager 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2007a-b; Gottschalk 2010).

Research to date has begun to investigate these claims and the theoretical logic on which they are built. For example, Chiricos et al. (2004) have shown that perceptions about the contribution of blacks to crime are positively associated with support for punitive policies (see also Barkan and Cohn 2005; King and Wheelock 2007). However, few studies exist that both examine whites’ views of black criminality and link these views to whites’ perceptions of victimization risk. This latter focus is of particular importance given that it is concern about crime, and the concomitant fear of victimization, that, according to racial threat arguments, is held to fuel whites’ support for punitive policies (Liska et al. 1981; Stults and Baumer 2007). Research also has not investigated the possibility, suggested by recent research (Drakulich 2009; Mears et al. 2009; Mears and Stewart 2010), that interracial contact (Allport 1954) can serve as a critical countervailing force that may reduce stereotypes about blacks (Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Quillian 2006). The result in turn may be a decrease in perceptions of blacks as criminals and, consequently, perceived risk of victimization. Mears et al. (2009), however, raise the possibility that interracial contact actually may raise whites’ awareness of crime in general and thus lead them to view not just blacks but also other racial and ethnic groups as more criminal, an effect that may increase perceptions of victimization risk.

The goal of the paper is to contribute to theory and research on public views about crime and, in particular, to efforts to understand better how interracial contact may affect whites’ perceptions of the criminality of blacks and of their risk of victimization. Scholars have not directly tested arguments about the effect that such contact may have on whites’ perceived victimization risk and whether the effect, if it exists, arises by influencing whites’ perceptions of the criminality of blacks or of other racial and ethnic groups. This paper aims to address these research gaps. We begin first by discussing prior work on the racialization of crime and then

discuss the salience of the contact hypothesis literature to this work. Then, drawing on scholarship on racial threat, racial typification, and the contact hypothesis, we develop arguments about interracial contact, perceptions of criminality, and perceived victimization risk. After discussing the data, which come from a national public opinion poll, and our analytic approach, we discuss the study's findings and its implications for theory and research.

## **BACKGROUND**

During the 1988 presidential election, the idea that blackness and criminality were one and the same became enshrined by George H. W. Bush's criticism of Governor Michael Dukakis for releasing Willie Horton, a black man convicted of murder who, failing to return from his weekend furlough, committed assault, robbery, and rape. The clear implication was not simply that Dukakis made a bad decision but also that black criminals constituted a fundamental threat to society (Skogan 1995). Jerome Miller, the once-director of juvenile corrections in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, aptly captured this view: "There are certain code words that allow you never to have to say 'race,' but everybody knows that what you mean and 'crime' is one of those . . . So when we talk about locking up more and more people, what we're really talking about is locking up more and more black men" (Szykowny 1994:12). Chiricos et al. (2004:359) have argued that it is this racialized typification of crime that Miller described that has fueled support for punitive sanctioning and the broad array of "get tough" criminal justice policy changes that occurred during and after the 1980s (see also Beckett and Sasson 2000; Garland 2001; Gottschalk 2006; Unnever and Cullen 2010). Other scholars have drawn attention to the fact that many whites harbor "deep-seated fears and anxieties attached to blacks as a social category," fears and anxieties that are intertwined with images of blacks as criminal victimizers (Entman and Rojecki 2000:209; see, generally, Western 2006; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010).

Such observations have given rise to studies that have drawn on racial threat theory (Blalock 1967; Liska 1992) to examine ways in which public views about crime and support for punitive

social control measures are linked to perceptions about blacks (see, generally, Skogan 1995, 1998; Peffley et al. 1997; Chiricos et al. 2004; King and Wheelock 2007; Unnever 2008; Quillian and Pager 2010). King and Wheelock (2007), for example, have shown that changes in county-level racial composition influence perceptions of black criminal threat, and, in turn, affect views about criminal punishments. Stults and Baumer (2007) have likewise determined that county-level racial composition is related to police size in part because it affects whites' fear of crime. Evidence from several other studies has shown that both objective racial composition of place—at the city, zip code, and neighborhood level (Liska et al. 1982; Covington and Taylor 1991; Taylor and Covington 1993; Quillian and Pager 2001, 2010)—and perceived neighborhood racial composition are positively related to whites' perceptions of the local crime problem (Chiricos et al. 1997, 2001). As Chiricos and colleagues (2001:335) have explained, such findings have provided affirmation of the existence of widespread “‘race coding,’ a kind of shorthand equation between blackness and crime.”

To date, however, few studies have integrated scholarship on interracial contact and its potential effect on how whites perceive black criminality and their victimization risk. Instead, the focus has been primarily on a range of related phenomena, such as media depictions of blacks (e.g., Entman and Rojecki 2000; Gilliam et al. 2002; Bjornstrom et al. 2010) and ways in which the racial typification of crime may contribute to greater punitiveness (e.g., Chiricos et al. 2004; King and Wheelock 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2010).

Recent research suggests the importance of expanding this body of work to focus on the experiences of whites with blacks and, in particular, on interracial contact to determine if such contact affects whites' views about black criminality and their views about crime (e.g., Mears et al. 2009; Mears and Stewart 2010). This line of investigation springs from the work of Gordon Allport (1954), which led to the “contact hypothesis,” that is, the idea that exposure to other groups can reduce stereotypes and create greater understanding of them (Sigelman and Welch 1993; Powers and Ellison 1995; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Quillian 2006). Research on the contact hypothesis lends broad-based support to it, as found in a recent meta-analysis by

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) (see, however, Skogan 1998:130; Dixon et al. 2005:698).

Even so, when applied to public views about crime, the evidence suggests that interracial contact may not necessarily lead to outcomes that the contact hypothesis anticipates. Mears et al. (2009), for example, examined the effect of interracial contact on concern about crime and Mears and Stewart (2010), using the same data, examined the effect of such contact on fear of crime. The studies found that interracial contact was associated with increased rather than decreased concern about crime and fear of crime, respectively. Such findings echo research that suggests that proximity to blacks may elevate fear of crime among whites (see, e.g., Skogan 1998:125). By contrast, Drakulich (2009) found, in a study of Seattle residents, that whites' stereotypes about blacks as drug- or gang-involved were reduced through contact with neighbors of other races or ethnicities and, in separate analyses, that "crime stereotypes about African-Americans reduce perceptions of neighborhood safety" (p. 105).

Notably, Mears and colleagues did not measure or thus examine perceived victimization risk or perceptions about the criminality of blacks relative to other groups and Drakulich's study (2009) did not specify the race of those with whom interracial contact occurred nor did it examine perceived criminality in general, individual perceived victimization risk, or the relationship among these three factors. A focus on perceived victimization risk is important because, as Chiricos et al. (1997:109) have argued, it taps into a "*cognitive* assessment of safety or risk" (p. 109; emphasis in original; see also LaGrange and Ferraro 1989). As research on the contact hypothesis underscores, that assessment is relevant because a central argument flowing from this literature is that interracial contact should educate a group, such as whites, about another group, such as blacks. In so doing, it should reduce stereotypes that, for example, being black is largely synonymous with being criminal. For this same reason, it is important to examine whether perceptions about black criminality mediate any identified relationship between whites' interracial contact with blacks in particular and whites' perceived victimization risk.

There is, in short, a need for studies of public views about crime and, in particular, for research that examines how actual interracial contact, and not simply proximity to blacks



(Covington and Taylor 1991; Chiricos et al. 1997; Skogan 1998; Gilliam et al. 2002; Quillian and Pager 2010) or contact with members of other racial or ethnic groups generally (Drakulich 2009), may affect how whites perceive the criminality of others, and, in particular, blacks, and, consequently, how they assess their own victimization risk. Below, we build on prior theoretical and empirical research on interracial contact and public opinion about race and crime, and investigate arguments about the salience of such contact for whites' perceptions about the criminality of blacks and other groups and, in turn, their perceptions about victimization risk. Our main focus is on the effect of interracial contact on perceptions about black criminality and in turn perceptions of victimization risk. Given the relatively nascent stage of scholarship on this issue as well as recent studies suggesting that interracial contact may not necessarily have straight-forward effects (Drakulich 2009; Mears et al. 2009; Mears and Stewart 2010), we explore ways in which interracial contact may influence views about the criminality of both blacks and non-blacks and in turn influence whites' views about their risk of victimization.

## **INTERRACIAL CONTACT AND PERCEIVED CRIMINALITY**

Prior scholarship suggests that interracial contact should lead whites' to hold a less stereotypical view of "blacks as criminals" (Drakulich 2009; Mears et al. 2009; Mears and Stewart 2010). It thus should be negatively associated with the perceived criminality of blacks and, by extension, should have little to no effect on the perceived criminality of whites and Latinos, precisely because the contact should primarily affect perceptions that whites may have of "blacks as criminals." Put differently, whites are not typically characterized as holding "whites as criminals" or "Latinos as criminals" stereotypes (but see, generally, Johnson et al. 2011; Welch et al. 2011). We would not expect, then, that, among whites, having friends who are black would affect anything other than views about the criminality of blacks as a group.

It is, of course, possible, however, that interracial contact in fact increases whites' perceptions of "blacks as criminals." Here, two possibilities exist. First, it may reinforce or

amplify stereotypes that whites hold about blacks as more criminal. That is, interracial contact may provide whites with information about the potentially greater amount of crime in fact committed or experienced by blacks. In this scenario, whites learn that offending or victimization rates among blacks in fact may be substantially greater than they otherwise might realize or believe. Mears et al. (2009:530) have described this possibility, one suggested by the studies on which they draw, in detail and noted that: “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 1997).” As Miethe (1995:27) more succinctly has observed, crime is, for blacks more so than whites, a “fact of life.” This possibility would result in a positive association between interracial contact and whites’ perceptions of the criminality of blacks. This same logic implies that there would be no effect of interracial contact on perceptions about the criminality of other racial or ethnic groups; the effect would only apply to perceptions about black criminality.

A second possibility is that interracial contact educates whites about crime in general. Compared to blacks, whites may in their day to day lives be relatively insulated from crime (Alba et al. 1994; Miethe 1995). Relationships with blacks may remove that insulation and, in turn, lead them to become more aware about crime (see Mears et al. 2009; Mears and Stewart 2010). Evidence suggests that gaining awareness of others’ experiences with crime, especially in the form of vicarious or indirect victimization, influences one’s own perceptions of crime (Skogan and Maxfield 1986; Ferraro 1996; Mesch 2000). Viewed in this way, interracial contact should not necessarily lead only to an increased perception that blacks are criminal. It also may lead whites to view all groups as more criminal than they otherwise would know or believe.

## **INTERRACIAL CONTACT AND WHITES’ PERCEIVED RISK OF VICTIMIZATION**

Given the above possibilities, the question arises as to what effect interracial contact may

have on whites' perceived risk of victimization. A logical extension of the above arguments is that interracial contact should decrease stereotypes of blacks as criminals and, consequently, decrease whites' perceived risk of victimization. This idea derives from a large body of scholarship that argues that, in the eyes of whites, crime and blackness are equated, due in part to the increasingly racialized way in which politicians and the media portray crime (e.g., Chiricos et al. 1997, 2001, 2004; Beckett and Sasson 2000; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Gilliam et al. 2002; Bontrager et al. 2005; Quillian 2006; Pager 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2007a-b; Johnson 2008). As Soss et al. (2002:400) have noted: "White Americans tend to associate criminality with people of color and believe that most criminals come from racial minorities."

From this perspective, views about crime—including perceptions about its prevalence, who engages it, and who is likely to be victimized—derive in no small part from views about blacks. Supporting this argument, research shows that a mere three-second exposure to an image of a black perpetrator in newscasts about crime increases individuals' concern about street violence (Gilliam et al. 1996:19). Similarly, a study by Gilliam and Iyengar (2005) revealed that exposing whites to an image of a young black suspect in a news story about a murder case made them more likely to perceive a higher threat of youth crime.

In short, if interracial contact reduces whites' perceptions about the criminality of blacks, then, by extension—precisely because perceptions of race and crime are reported to be highly linked—it should reduce their perceived victimization risk. If, however, it increases views of blacks as criminals, it in turn may increase whites' perceived risk of victimization, especially if, as the literature suggests, views about the occurrence of crime are bound to views about race.

What, though, about the effect of interracial contact on whites' perceptions of the criminality of other racial and ethnic groups (e.g., whites and Latinos) and, in turn, on whites' perceived risk of victimization? If the effect of such contact exclusively centers around dispelling stereotypes about blacks, there should be no effect of it on perceptions of the criminality of other groups. If, however, interracial contact has an educative effect, the result may be an increase in the perceptions of the criminality not just of blacks but also of people in general, regardless of their

race or ethnicity. If so, we in turn would expect the perceived criminality of all racial and ethnic groups to be positively associated with whites' perceived risk of victimization.<sup>1</sup>

## **DATA AND ANALYSES**

To explore these possibilities, we draw on data from a national public opinion telephone survey poll of adults ages 18 or older conducted in December 2009 and January 2010 (N=520). The survey, which was undertaken by the Research Network and includes a unique set of measures—including items that ask about interracial friendships—relevant for the present study, was administered to a random sample of individuals generated using a list-assisted method (Tourangeau 2004:778-779). Only one respondent per household, selected using the “most recent birthday” method (Kish 1965), was included. The Network employed a 10-callback rule. All calls were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing.

Of all subjects who began the survey, 89 percent completed it; this completion rate is substantially greater than the national average of 60 percent (Weisberg et al. 1989). The overall response rate, based on the calculation recommended by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR 2008) was 30 percent. This response rate, while less than ideal, accords with other recent studies using telephone surveys (e.g., King and Wheelock 2007; Hirschfield and Piquero 2010) and likely reflects the decline in response rates that has been occurring since the 1970s (Pew Research Center 2004; Curtin et al. 2005). Importantly, research suggests that the declines have not generated substantial non-response bias in the statistics derived from telephone survey data (see, e.g., Curtin et al. 2005; Keeter et al. 2000, 2006). This consideration, the focus of the present study on examining relationships among select outcomes and covariates and not on generating prevalence estimates, and the unique set of measures the data include point to the utility of the data for investigating the study's research questions.

Given the focus of our study, we restrict our analyses to non-Hispanic whites (N=433) and draw on questions from the national poll that measure the perceived risk of victimization,

interracial contact, the perceived criminality of different racial and ethnic groups, and several social and demographic characteristics of respondents. The specific measures are described below; descriptive statistics are provided in table 1.<sup>2</sup>

Insert Table 1 about here

Drawing on prior research (e.g., Ferraro and LaGrange 1987; Warr 2000), we use a measure of perceived victimization risk that comes from responses to the following six-item question: “On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all likely and 10 means very likely, how likely do you think it is that you or a member of your family will \_\_\_\_\_?” The six types of victimization were: “have your car stolen”; “have someone break into your house when no one is home”; “have someone break into your house when someone is home”; “be robbed or mugged on the street”; “be raped or sexually assaulted”; and “be murdered.” To create the victimization risk measure, we averaged responses to these six questions (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.90$ ). A separately conducted factor analysis confirmed that the items all highly correlated with a single factor (eigenvalue=3.69), with loadings that ranged from .72 to .82.<sup>3</sup> This measure is similar to those used in other studies of public views about crime (see, e.g., Lee and Ulmer 2000; Chiricos et al. 2001; Eitle and Taylor 2008; Meld et al. 2009).

Interracial contact was measured using two similar questions. The first focused on friendships with black friends, and asked: “Now I am going to ask you about your personal interaction with other racial and ethnic groups. What percent of your friends are black?” The second question focused on contact with black co-workers, and asked: “What percent of people who you talk with at work are black?” We took the average of the responses to the two questions and then recoded them into four categories to address skew (see table 1). A central benefit of these items consists of the focus not on passing familiarity with blacks but instead on friendships with and working relationships with them; it is these more intimate types of contact that prior work suggests should exert an effect (see, generally, Sigelman and Welch 1993;

Powers and Ellison 1995; Pettigrew 1998; Dixon 2006).

To measure respondents' views about the criminality of others, the following question was used: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all likely and 10 means very likely, how likely is each of the following?" Six scenarios were described: "A white male committing a violent crime before age 30"; "a black male committing a violent crime before age 30"; "a Latino male committing a violent crime before age 30"; "a white male selling drugs before age 30"; "a black male selling drugs before age 30"; "a Latino male selling drugs before age 30." We use these age cut-offs because teenagers and young adults, as Quillian and Pager (2001:724) have emphasized, "have long been seen as a potential source of trouble" and because it is young black males who appear "especially likely to activate stereotypes that link race and criminality." Other accounts suggest that the idea of criminality "has become a euphemism for young, black male" (Barak 1994:137; see, generally, Western 2006; Hagan 2010; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010). To create perceived criminality measures specific to whites, blacks, and Latinos, we averaged the two responses for each group.

In all models, we control for a range of factors that have been used in prior research and that, if omitted, might bias the estimated effects of interracial contact. Because some studies suggest that social context, including racial composition, influences how individuals perceive crime (Taylor et al. 1979; Warr 1995; Skogan 1995, 1998; Gilliam et al. 2002; Chiricos et al. 2004; J. Dixon 2006; T. Dixon 2008; Mears and Stewart 2010; Quillian and Pager 2001, 2010) and because of the focus in this study on the effects of interracial contact, we control for respondent perceptions of the racial composition of their local community. Respondents were asked: "When you think of people living within a mile of your home, what percent would you say are black?" The responses were recoded to address skew (see table 1). In addition, we introduce controls for respondent sex, age, education, marital status, home ownership, and political ideology. These measures and their codings are those typically used in prior research on public opinion about crime and justice (see, e.g., Cullen et al. 1998; Sprott 1999; Chiricos et al. 2004; Sims and Johnston 2004; Unnever et al. 2007).

The analyses focus first on investigation, using ordinary least squares regression, of whether interracial contact affects whites' perceptions about the criminality of blacks as compared with other racial and ethnic groups. The second set of regression analyses directly examines whether interracial contact predicts whites' perceived victimization risk and whether any identified relationship can be explained by perceptions about the perceived criminality of blacks as against the perceived criminality of other groups.

## **FINDINGS**

As a logical prelude to examining whether interracial contact affects whites' perceptions of victimization risk, we begin by investigating whether such contact is associated with perceptions of the criminality of blacks as well as the criminality of whites and Latinos, respectively. Below, we then turn to the question of whether interracial contact effects are mediated by whites' views about the criminality of these groups. Table 2 presents results of regression analyses in which whites' perceptions of the criminality of different racial and ethnic groups is the dependent variable and interracial contact is the independent variable. Inspection of the table shows that there is, indeed, a statistically significant estimated effect of interracial contact on perceived criminality. Specifically, net of the controls, whites who reported that at least one-fifth or more of their friends or co-workers are black were more likely to perceive blacks—and also whites and Latinos—as criminal.<sup>4</sup>

Insert Table 2 about here

This finding runs counter to the conventional interracial contact argument. That is, it appears that interracial contact may reinforce stereotypes about blacks and thus lead to a greater likelihood of perceiving blacks as criminal. However, the results are also consistent with the argument that interracial contact has an educative effect that increases whites' perceptions that people in general, not just blacks, are more likely to offend. Put differently, were the effect

exclusively one of amplifying stereotypes about blacks as criminals, there should be no statistically significant association between interracial contact and the perceptions among whites of the perceived criminality of whites and Latinos. The fact that interracial contact increases whites' perceptions of the criminality of blacks, whites, and Latinos thus lends greater support to the idea that such contact may educate whites about the fact or magnitude of crime in general, as opposed to crime that somehow is specific to blacks.

We turn now to the question of whether interracial contact increases or decreases whites' perceived victimization risk. As review of model 1 in table 3 shows, interracial contact is positively associated with perceived victimization risk. Among whites who reported that 10-19 percent of their friends or co-workers are black, and relative to those who reported having fewer black friends or co-workers, there is a greater perceived likelihood of victimization ( $b=.894$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Perceived risk is even more pronounced among whites who reported that 20 percent or more of their friends or co-workers are black ( $b=1.556$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Notably, given prior studies that show that whites who live near blacks express more fear of crime (Skogan 1998:125; see also Liska et al. 1982; Covington and Taylor 1991; Alba et al. 1994; Chiricos et al. 1997; Quillian and Pager 2001, 2010), the effect holds even after controlling for proximity to blacks in respondents' local communities.<sup>5</sup>

Insert Table 3 about here

Here, again, in contrast to what the contact hypothesis anticipates, interracial contact exerts an effect that, at first blush, appears contrary to it. To the extent that crime is racialized, interracial contact should serve as a countering force, one that enables whites to view blacks as no more criminal than other groups. In turn, the effect—in a context in which crime is racialized—should be to decrease rather than to increase whites' perceived risk of victimization.

Before discussing this pattern in more depth, we turn to model 2, which investigates whether the effect of interracial contact arises, or is mediated, by influencing whites' perceptions of the



criminality of blacks. As inspection of model 2 shows, we find only partial support for this idea. Inclusion of the perceived black criminality measure, which has a positive and statistically significant effect ( $b=.303$ ,  $p<.001$ ), results in a modest reduction in the effect of interracial contact. For example, among whites for whom 20 percent or more of their friends or co-workers are black, the estimated effect of interracial contact is reduced by 14 percent—from  $b=1.556$  in model 1 to  $b=1.338$ —in model 2.

These results suggest that, among whites, interracial contact may lead to a greater likelihood of viewing blacks as criminals and, in turn and to a modest extent, to a greater perception of victimization risk. Recall, however, that the results from table 2 suggested the possibility that interracial contact instead may contribute to what Mears et al. (2009) describe an educative effect, one in which whites, by dint of their contact with blacks, become more aware about crime in general. This awareness does not necessarily mean that they would conclude that only blacks commit crime or are more likely to do so. Rather, as suggested by table 2, it may lead them to view all groups, regardless of race or ethnicity, as more likely to offend than they otherwise would have thought absent contact with blacks.

This idea in turn suggests that interracial contact effects should be mediated not only by perceptions of the perceived criminality of blacks but also by the perceived criminality of other racial and ethnic groups. In fact, and as can be seen in models 3 and 4, inclusion of measures of whites' perceptions of the criminality of whites and Latinos, respectively, results in largely similar reductions in the interracial contact effect identified in model 2. That is, the effect of interracial contact appears to be partially mediated by perceptions about the criminality of different racial and ethnic groups, not just that of blacks.<sup>6</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of this study was to advance scholarship on public opinion about how whites' perceptions of criminal victimization risk may be affected by interracial contact. The results can

be summarized briefly. First, interracial contact increased whites' perceptions of the criminality not just of blacks but also of whites and Latinos; put differently, it increased perceptions about the criminality of people in general. For whites, a contact effect appears to require more than passing acquaintance—viewed quantitatively—with blacks; in this study, the identified effect surfaced only when roughly one-fifth or more of one's friends or co-workers were black. Second, interracial contact increased whites' perceived likelihood of victimization, and this effect appears to have been partially driven by increasing perceptions of the criminality of different racial and ethnic groups, not just that of blacks.

The results at first blush may appear contrary to prior research on the contact hypothesis. However, interracial contact should not be assumed to have a uniform effect. As a general matter, it should reduce prejudicial and stereotypical views; at the same time, the precise effect can vary depending on the type of contact and the attitudes and beliefs that are being examined (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Quillian 2006). Put differently, interracial contact matters, but the direction of effect may be variable. For example, given the racialized context of American criminal justice, research that documents a racial threat effect on whites' views about crime and justice and that crime is more a fact of life for blacks than whites, it in fact may be reasonable to expect, as Mears et al. (2009) have suggested, that interracial contact may amplify existing stereotypes or, alternatively, exert an educative effect that creates “an awareness among whites that crime is more pervasive than they otherwise would believe” (p. 539).<sup>7</sup>

Such a possibility poses direct implications for racial threat theory. If, for example, interracial contact educates whites about crime, it may lead to greater concern and fear about crime and, for that reason, greater support for increased social control efforts and tougher crime policies. The analyses here suggest that any such effect would be driven only partially by interracial contact increasing perceptions of blacks as criminals, as evidenced by the relatively small reduction in the effect of interracial contact on perceived victimization risk when perceived black criminality was included in model 2 in table 3. By extension, and given that in this study interracial contact increased perceptions of the criminality of whites and Latinos, not just of

blacks, the more likely explanation would appear to be that interracial contact indeed exerts an educative effect about crime in general rather than stereotypes about black offending in particular. In short, racial threat effects that have been identified in the literature may stem in part from whites' perceptions that they and others, including blacks, are at risk of victimization.

This possibility would help account for Skogan's (1995:70) observation 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." The mechanism may be, as suggested here, that the proximity both reduces prejudice and raises whites' awareness about crime. This awareness, in turn, may generate a perceived need to do something—such as increase formal social control policies—to address it. Such a possibility runs counter to the logic of racial threat theories, which imply that such an association stems from racial animus and, in particular, the threat of a minority group ascending into power. At least in the case of crime, it may sometimes be the case that whites perceive a crime problem to exist that affects all groups, not just them, or that it affects other groups and so warrants an escalated social control response.

Such an explanation must be adjudicated through empirical research, all the more so given that interracial contact effects may be contingent on the particular types of contact that occur and the setting or context within which they happen (Jackman and Crane 1986; Sigelman and Welch 1993; McPherson et al. 2001; Gilliam et al. 2002; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Dixon 2006; Briggs 2007). For example, it is possible that the effect of such contact may vary depending on the type and intensity of media coverage in a given area. To illustrate, in places where media depictions do not sensationalize crime in ways that directly associate blacks with serious or violent offending, interracial contact may provide little by way of an educative effect. By contrast, in areas where black criminality is highlighted—as is the case in many news accounts of crime (Entman and Rojecki 2001; Dixon 2008)—interracial contact may provide a greater educative effect, one that perhaps creates more awareness about the fact of crime while concomitantly reducing stereotypes that view blackness and criminality as synonymous.

There are additional lines of inquiry that should also be explored. Because so few studies

have investigated interracial contact and public views about crime, it will be important for studies to replicate the research here and to explore related lines of inquiry. This study relied, for example, on limited measures of contact, a small sample, and no objective measures of crime. Accordingly, future studies ideally will include a broader range of measures of interracial contact that tap into different life domains (e.g., school, work, home, leisure), the quality of contacts (e.g., casual or close), and the settings (e.g., rural, suburban, urban) in which the contacts occur (see, generally, Pettigrew 1998; Dixon 2006; Gray et al. 2008). Pettigrew and Tropp (2006:752) have argued, for example, that the “characteristics of the contact setting, the groups under study, and the individuals involved may all contribute to enhancing or inhibiting contact’s effects.” It seems reasonable to anticipate that similar contingencies may affect whites’ and other groups’ views of crime and victimization risk (see, e.g., Drakulich 2009).

As noted, future research also ideally will include objective measures of local crime. Such information will help to identify the extent to which contact effects arise from interactions occurring primarily in areas where greater racial and ethnic heterogeneity and crime exist. In such cases, whites may have an objective basis for perceiving neighbors, regardless of race or ethnicity, as more likely to be criminal and for viewing themselves as being at greater risk of victimization. Here, then, contact may not necessarily affect the perceived criminality of others or the perceived likelihood of victimization; rather, it may simply co-occur with them. We would expect, then, that controlling for the local crime rate should reduce or eliminate the effect of interracial contact on whites’ perceptions of the criminality of others and of their own risk.

That said, crime is more common experience among urban minorities, more so than for urban whites (Miethe 1995). Indeed, Alba et al. (1994:427) have noted that “even the most affluent blacks are not able to escape from crime, for they reside in communities as crime-prone as those housing the poorest whites.” It thus is entirely conceivable that, independent of objective measures of crime in the areas in which whites’ live, interracial contact provides a conduit through which whites learn more about crime than otherwise would be the case (Mears et al. 2009; Mears and Stewart 2010). That understanding may lead them to be more attuned to crime

in their immediate neighborhood or to the fact of crime in the broader community or area in which they live or traverse. This possibility raises the intriguing idea that interracial contact may actually have a greater effect on whites in urban areas or whites living near areas that are racially and ethnically heterogeneous, an effect that would arise precisely because minorities in such areas typically will experience more crime. To adjudicate among such possibilities, studies are needed that include objective measures of crime and measures of interracial or interethnic contact, that examine whether views about perceived victimization risk are altered by contact, whether the source of any such effect arises by affecting views about the criminality of specific groups or educating whites about crime, and not least whether, in urban or racially or ethnically heterogeneous areas, contact has a greater effect in affecting whites' perceived victimization risk.

During an era in which “get tough” criminal justice policies have become common, scholars have focused considerable attention on identifying how such policies are racialized. The studies have examined ways in which race influences accounts of crime and the impact of the criminal justice system on blacks who enter it and on the communities from which they come. Not surprisingly, then, considerable attention has also turned to investigating minority and racial threat theoretical arguments about the criminal justice system and whites' views about minorities and crime. There is, however, a need to investigate how views about minorities and crime are acquired and transmitted. Many studies have focused on the effects of the media (e.g., Gilliam et al. 2002; Bjornstrom et al. 2010). But a focus is also needed on how contact, or a lack of contact, with minority groups may contribute to or reduce views, such as stereotypes about blacks as criminals, that are presumed both to fuel racial threat processes and to be key sources of support for more punitive policies (Mears et al. 2009). The focus should not extend only to public opinion about punishment but also toward crime prevention and rehabilitative measures. For example, interracial contact may educate whites about crime and lead to greater concern about crime (Mears et al. 2009), but the result may not necessarily be an increase in support only for punitive policies. Rather, it may well be that it increases whites' support for a range of efforts, some punitive and some rehabilitative in orientation, to increase public safety for

themselves and others (see, e.g., Cullen et al. 2000). At the same time, attention is needed toward identifying the intervening pathways, such as the racial or ethnic typification of crime (Chiricos et al. 2004; Welch et al. 2011), through which minority contact may affect whites' views about crime and criminal justice policy.

Further theoretical and empirical work also is needed that identifies other pathways through which minority contact may affect whites' views about both crime and criminal justice policy. One possibility, for example, may be that interracial contact influences whites' perceptions of victimization risk by affecting their views of the police or other social control agents. That is, because blacks are more likely to have negative experiences with and, consequently, less positive views of law enforcement (Weitzer and Tuch 2006), interracial contact may provide whites' with information about the ineffectiveness of the police to control crime. It also is possible that interracial contact, among whites, may foster empathy toward black offenders and crime victims. Such an effect could conceivably increase whites' support for crime control efforts in certain forms (e.g., putting more police on the streets), while at the same time reducing their support for more punitive policies (e.g., death penalty, three-strike laws) (see Unnever and Cullen 2008).

America continues to experience racial divides that permeate social life and that have consequences for crime and justice (McPherson et al. 2001; Gottschalk 2010). It is, perhaps, the unique history of blacks in this country that has enabled the "racialization" of crime such that race, and blackness in particular, has come to be strongly equated in media accounts and policy discussions with crime and violence (Hagan 2010; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010). Precisely because of the stakes involved—crime, mass incarceration, continuing racial divisions, and racial discrimination—greater attention should be given to understanding how race relations influence public views about crime, and, in turn, to understanding how such views may affect policy (Burstein 2010; Unnever and Cullen 2010).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> An educative effect need not imply that whites and blacks discuss crime intensively or that crime stands as an especially salient topic of discussion. Whites may directly or indirectly learn about crime through association with blacks without discussing crime.

<sup>2</sup> The 2010 U.S. Census reports that 196,817,552 non-Hispanic whites reside in the United States. Given this population size and using a 95 percent confidence level, the maximum margin of error when responses to a question are evenly split for prevalence estimates derived from our sample of 433 non-Hispanic whites is  $\pm 4.71$ . The sample is relatively small for purposes of generating prevalence estimates. Our focus, however, is not on generating prevalence estimates but on examining interracial contact and its effect on perceived victimization risk.

<sup>3</sup> We tested for skew for the four dependent variables: perceived criminality of blacks, perceived criminality of whites, perceived criminality of Latinos, and perceived victimization risk. There was no evidence of skew for the first three and minimal evidence of skew for the last (skewness=1.04, kurtosis=3.60). We re-ran models with this measure using a natural log of it. The results were statistically and substantively the same as those presented here; we report the original measure for ease of interpretation. (The ancillary analyses are available upon request.)

<sup>4</sup> We investigated other recodings of the interracial contact measure (e.g., different percentage break points and sets of percentage categories); the substantive significance of the results was largely the same regardless of the codings used. We also conducted analyses that used each contact measure separately; some differences in the statistical significance of some of the contact dummy variables surfaced across the different models, but the main findings were, again, largely similar. (The results are available upon request.) Given these findings and the fact that no strong theoretical basis exists for anticipating differential effects of each type of contact, we combined them, the low correlation notwithstanding ( $r=.35$ ), on the logic that the two together better capture exposure to blacks.

<sup>5</sup> It bears emphasizing that the argument here is that whites may strongly associate crime with

blacks such that, regardless of their proximity to this group, their perceptions about black criminality—and not their perceptions about the criminality of whites or of Latinos—predicts perceived risk of victimization. The concern may arise that such an effect should not exist in areas where whites report having no black neighbors. For this reason, we excluded such individuals and re-ran the analyses in table 3. The findings, including the substantive and statistical significance of the perceived criminality measures, were largely the same as those presented in table 3. This approach is conservative in two ways. First, it ignores the possibility that perceptions about crime victimization risk may be driven by the racialization of crime, as described above, and by media coverage of crime in other places, including media accounts of who (e.g., blacks) commits more, or more serious or sensational, crime in those places (Heath 1984). Second, it ignores the likelihood that even when whites do not live near blacks, they commute through or go to areas where they may see or interact with blacks.

<sup>6</sup> It may be that the salient issue is whites' views of the relative criminality of blacks versus whites. To investigate this possibility, we computed two measures: the difference between whites' perceived criminality of blacks and whites' perceived criminality of whites, and the ratio of whites' perceived criminality of blacks vs. whites' perceived criminality of whites. Neither measure was statistically significant in model 2 (where they were separately substituted for the perceived black criminality measure).

<sup>7</sup> One reviewer suggested the possibility that the interracial contact effect might be conditioned by racial composition and by respondents' education level. We explored this idea in analyses that paralleled those in table 3 but included interaction terms (interracial contact x racial composition in one set of models and interracial contact x education in another set). No statistically significant interaction effects emerged.



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**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
<b>Dependent Variable</b>		
Perceived Victimization Risk (0=not at all likely; 10=very likely)	2.83	2.22
<b>Independent Variables</b>		
Interracial Contact (IC)		
IC 0% (0=other; 1=has no friends or co-workers who are black)	.15	.35
IC 1-9% (0=other; 1=1% to 9% of friends and co-workers are black)	.41	.49
IC 10-19% (0=other; 1=10% to 19% of friends and co-workers are black)	.20	.40
IC 20+% (0=other; 1=20% or more of friends and co-workers are black)	.24	.43
Perceived Criminality		
Perceived Criminality of Blacks (0=not at all likely; 10=very likely)	5.93	2.24
Perceived Criminality of Whites (0=not at all likely; 10=very likely)	4.90	2.29
Perceived Criminality of Latinos (0=not at all likely; 10=very likely)	5.49	2.30
<b>Control Variables</b>		
Racial Composition of Neighborhood (1=0%; 2=1-9%; 3=10-19%; 4=20-29%; 5=30-39%; 6=40-49%; 7=50% or more perceived to be black)	2.54	1.67
Female (0=male; 1=female)	.55	.50
Age (1=18-25; 2=25-34; 3=35-44; 4=45-54; 5=55-64; 6=65-74; 7=75+)	4.94	1.51
Education (1=grades 1-7; 2=grade 8; 3=grades 9-11; 4=graduated H.S.; 5=some college; 6=bachelor's degree; 7=graduate degree, not Ph.D. or M.D.; 8=Ph.D., M.D., or other beyond Master's)	5.39	1.20
Married (0=not married; 1=married)	.62	.49
Homeowner (0=rent; 1=own)	.89	.31
Conservative Political Ideology (0=liberal, moderate; 1=conservative)	.48	.50

**Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Whites' Perceptions of the Criminality of Different Racial and Ethnic Groups on Interracial Contact**

	Model 1: Perceived Criminality of Blacks	Model 2: Perceived Criminality of Whites	Model 3: Perceived Criminality of Latinos
Interracial Contact (IC)			
IC 1-9%	-.168 (.332)	-.072 (.318)	.002 (.329)
IC 10-19%	.013 (.382)	.290 (.378)	.053 (.398)
IC 20+%	.777* (.387)	1.107** (.383)	.827* (.395)
Control Variables			
Racial Composition	.025 (.070)	-.030 (.075)	-.066 (.075)
Female	.478* (.219)	.828*** (.217)	.538* (.225)
Age	.006 (.083)	-.055 (.083)	-.004 (.085)
Education	-.371*** (.090)	-.382*** (.093)	-.274** (.090)
Married	-.478* (.221)	-.230 (.218)	-.436 (.235)
Owns Home	-.551 (.382)	-.688 (.398)	-.642 (.428)
Conservative	.183 (.220)	-.254 (.220)	.063 (.232)
Intercept	8.153*** (.778)	7.436*** (.759)	7.431*** (.768)
R-squared	.113	.143	.084

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed)

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

**Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Whites' Perceptions of Victimization Risk on Interracial Contact and Perceptions of the Criminality of Different Racial and Ethnic Groups**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Interracial Contact (IC)</b>				
IC 1-9%	.499 (.263)	.578* (.267)	.543* (.263)	.506 (.265)
IC 10-19%	.894* (.346)	.844* (.345)	.770* (.343)	.837* (.337)
IC 20+%	1.556*** (.368)	1.338*** (.369)	1.242** (.375)	1.329*** (.361)
<b>Perceived Criminality</b>				
Perceived Crim. of Blacks	—	.303*** (.046)	—	—
Perceived Crim. of Whites	—	—	.310*** (.050)	—
Perceived Crim. of Latinos	—	—	—	.307*** (.046)
<b>Control Variables</b>				
Racial Composition	.153* (.074)	.138 (.072)	.155* (.071)	.165* (.070)
Female	.753*** (.197)	.597** (.193)	.499* (.194)	.573** (.192)
Age	-.057 (.069)	-.061 (.068)	-.042 (.068)	-.062 (.067)
Education	-.283** (.082)	-.174* (.079)	-.170* (.080)	-.217** (.080)
Married	-.452* (.222)	-.292 (.217)	-.378 (.215)	-.286 (.214)
Owns Home	-.210 (.387)	-.031 (.358)	.025 (.357)	-.022 (.343)
Conservative	.255 (.208)	.217 (.203)	.334 (.202)	.267 (.201)
Intercept	3.382*** (.731)	.945 (.766)	1.108 (.748)	1.237 (.760)
R-squared	.164	.242	.249	.259

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed)

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