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Chapter 2

SUPER-PREDATORS REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

In 1995, John DiIulio created controversy when he predicted that a wave of young, violent, remorseless juvenile delinquents known as super-predators would plague the country and increase crime rates. However, the prediction was made in the midst of the greatest decline in crime in the nation's history, and the super-predator thesis was vilified as conservative ideology. The current study revisits the super-predator thesis and demonstrates that it has substantial empirical support from the criminological literature. While criminologists should be cautious in making projections of crime rates since they have proven very difficult to predict, the notion that very violent young offenders commit a disproportionate amount of crime is empirically accurate. In the end, DiIulio was guilty of bad timing, but his central thesis was not only defensible, but also correct.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 in an article published in *The Weekly Standard* periodical, criminologist John DiIulio gained national attention and created controversy among academics when he predicted that a wave of young, violent, mostly minority, remorseless juvenile delinquents, known as super-predators would plague the country and increase crime rates. However, the prediction was made during the midst of perhaps the most sustained and impressive decline in crime in the nation's history. Because the prediction was at odds with the prevailing feelings

of public safety and because DiIulio's strident style ruffled the feathers of the criminological orthodoxy, the super-predator thesis was vilified as conservative ideology. This was a mistake. Drawing support from the homicide, criminal careers, gang, and juvenile psychopathy literatures, we argue that the notion of young, violent, mostly minority males committing crime without conscience is defensible meaning there is likely considerable verisimilitude to the super-predator thesis.

DIULIO'S THESIS

The basis for DiIulio's (1995) super-predator thesis stems from his experiences interacting with criminal justice practitioners and conducting research in criminal justice settings. After an address to the district attorneys association, DiIulio heard countless stories from prosecutors in the nation's largest cities that a qualitative change had occurred regarding the character and age of violent criminals. They were perceived to be more frightening than previous generations of offenders and were arriving at this point at shockingly younger ages. Several practitioners commented to DiIulio that youths still in elementary school were frequently armed, would inflict remorseless violence on impulse, and fundamentally lacked respect for human life. DiIulio himself had stopped conducting research in juvenile correctional facilities because "the buzz of impulsive violence, the vacant stares and smiles, and the remorseless eyes were at once too frightening and too depressing (my God, these are children!) for me to pretend to 'study' them (1995, p. 24)."

Although the thesis was pilloried because it came during the midst of the great crime decline of the late twentieth century, DiIulio was aware of the crime decline and even incorporates it into his essay. However, DiIulio also described the dramatic increases in juvenile crime, especially murders committed by juveniles that occurred between 1985 and 1995 when the article was published. In other words, DiIulio contrasted the general crime trends (which were down) to age-specific crime rates (which the data available then showed were up). To support the notion of violent young offenders, DiIulio cites the criminal career literature and descriptive data on homicides in major American cities.

The causal explanation for this troubling type of juvenile offender was, according to DiIulio, moral poverty which is:

the poverty of being without loving, capable, responsible adults to teach right from wrong. It is the poverty of being without parents and other authorities who habituate you to feel joy at others' joy, pain at others' pain, happiness when you do right, remorse when you do wrong. It is the poverty of growing up in the virtual absence of people who teach morality by their own everyday example and who insist that you follow suit. In the extreme, moral poverty is the poverty of growing up surrounded by deviant, delinquent, and criminal adults in abusive, violence-ridden, fatherless, Godless, and jobless settings. In sum, whatever their material circumstances, kids of whatever race, creed, or color are most likely to become criminally depraved when they are morally deprived (1995, p. 25).

According to the theory, super-predators are the feral result of moral poverty. They are present-oriented, self-centered, unempathetic, and exposed to the most criminogenic environments in the country. Based on demographic projections, DiIulio suggested that tens

of thousands of super-predators were on the horizon. However, DiIulio did not argue that a wave of super-predators would immediately increase crime rates. He indicated that the wave of super-predators would arrive ten years later in 2005. This bears repeating. DiIulio did not forecast an upsurge in crime to occur between 1995 and 2005. He surmised that it would begin in approximately 2005.

THE CRIMINOLOGICAL REACTION

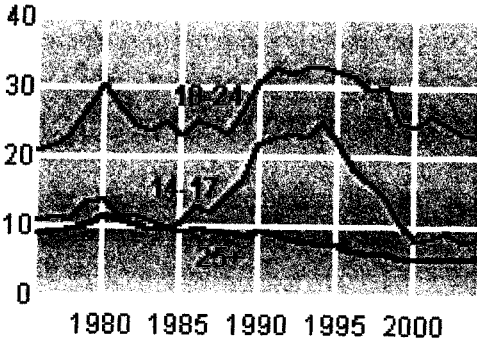
The reaction to the super-predators thesis among academic criminologists was immediate. DiIulio's original super-predators article and his book *Body Count* (Bennett, DiIulio, & Walters, 1996) which expanded the moral poverty idea have been cited more than 100 times in the literature and the super-predator idea is the topic of considerable debate at annual meetings of both the American Society of Criminology and Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. The response was predictably negative for the most part. For instance, Barry Krisberg described the super-predator as a myth and DiIulio as a commentator "not to be outdone in rhetoric" (2004, p. 2). Barry Feld (2000, p. 109) suggested that the empirical regularities of juvenile homicides (e.g., gangs, use of firearms, disproportionately committed by minorities) were used by the media to inflame public fear. In turn, "politicians have promoted and exploited those fears for electoral advantage, decried a coming generation of 'superpredators' suffering from 'moral poverty,' and demonized young people in order to muster support for policies to transfer youths to criminal court and to incarcerate them." Elsewhere, the super-predator thesis was dismissed as inflammatory rhetoric, part of a moral panic about juvenile delinquency, and, importantly, was not figured into Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Howell, 2003). A leading criminological theory text (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2007) expressed concern for the super-predator thesis and characterized it as lacking in precision, conservative, and (incorrectly) at odds with other explanations for violent young offenders.

Philip Cook and John Laub reviewed the epidemic of youth violence that began in the mid-1980s and noted that it was concentrated demographically among young, African American males for whom the homicide rate increased nearly 500 percent. Cook and Laub offered several explanations for the increase in violent delinquency garnered from the criminological literature, such as gun availability and the crack-cocaine explosion. Interestingly, the super-predator thesis was not viewed as helpful in understanding homicides among youths. This conclusion is the consensus in the criminological literature. The notion of moral poverty was pilloried and viewed as clearly inferior to alternative explanations including demographic shifts, firearm availability, economic shifts, and the crack-cocaine surge. Similarly, irrespective of the pathology of young offenders, the label of "super-predator" was received as too provocative, too glib, and too conservative to be taken seriously by criminologists.

Homicide offending by age, gender, and race, 1976-2004

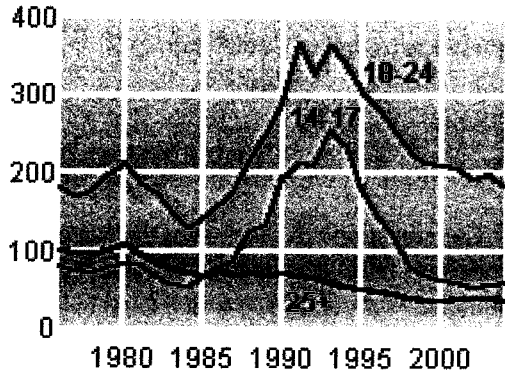
White males

Rate per 100,000 population



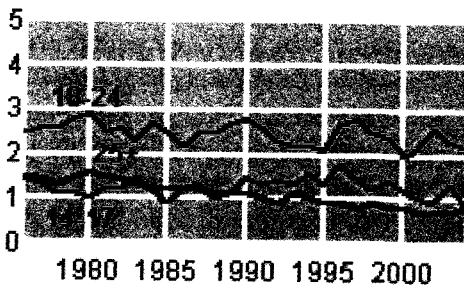
Black males

Rate per 100,000 population



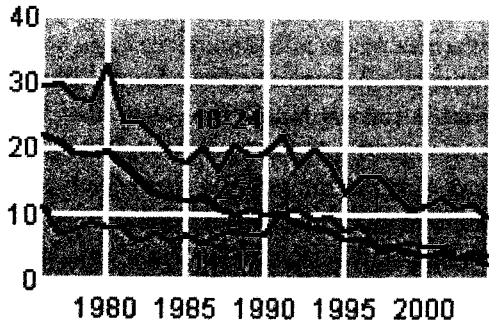
White females

Rate per 100,000 population



Black females

Rate per 100,000 population



Source: Fox, J. A., & Zawitz, M. W. (2006). *Homicide trends in the United States*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 1. Homicide Offending by Demographics, 1976-2004.

CURRENT FOCUS

Criminologists may have been too eager to disagree with DiIulio's super-predator thesis on ideological grounds. Drawing from well-known literatures in criminology, we argue that the conceptualization of a young, male, disproportionately minority, conscienceless, impulsive, and exceedingly violent person matches the empirical profile of serious young offenders in the United States. In this sense, while the admittedly over-the-top super-predator moniker may have been used by DiIulio for effect, its accuracy is difficult to deny.

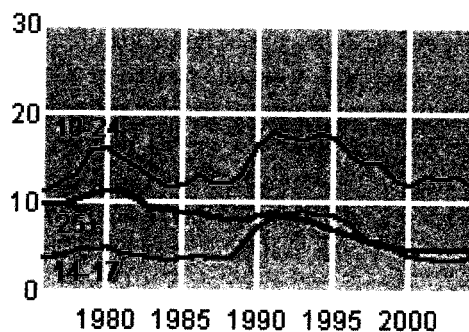
EVIDENCE

While DiIulio theorized that all social groups were exposed to moral poverty, he intimated that racial minorities, especially African Americans were most susceptible to moral poverty and super-predator status. A useful proxy for super-predator status is homicide involvement as both victim and offender. Figure 1 illustrates homicide victimization rates disaggregated by race, sex, and age group spanning the years 1976 to 2004. Irrespective of the time frame, African Americans had significantly higher homicide victimization rates than whites. The group with the highest homicide victimization and commensurately the group most implicated by the super-predator thesis are African American males. In 1995, the publication year that the super-predator thesis was advanced, the homicide victimization rate for African American males ages 18-24 was 150 per 100,000 and for the 14-17 age group the rate was roughly 70 per 100,000. For white males the respective rates were 18 per 100,000 and 8 per 100,000.

Homicide victimization by age, gender, and race, 1976-2004

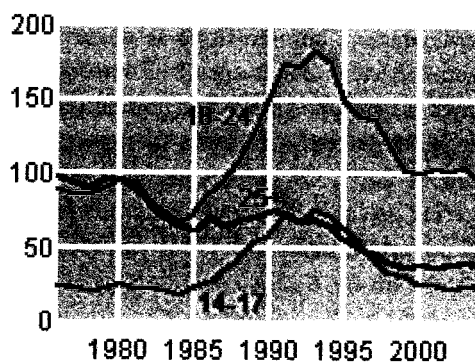
White males

Rate per 100,000 population



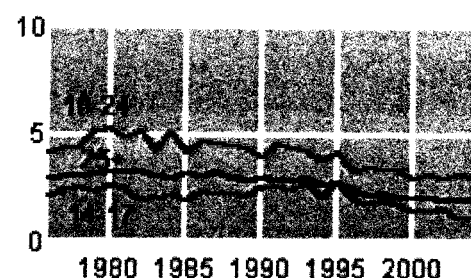
Black males

Rate per 100,000 population



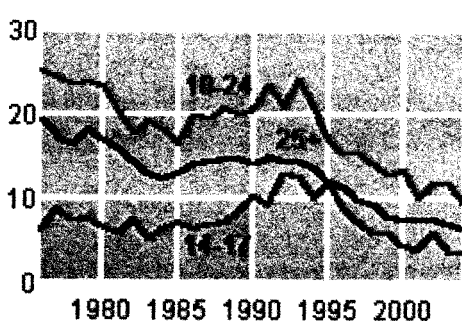
White females

Rate per 100,000 population



Black females

Rate per 100,000 population



Source: Fox, J. A., & Zawitz, M. W. (2006). *Homicide trends in the United States*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

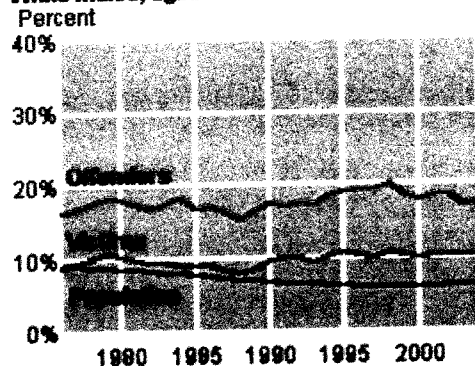
Figure 2. Homicide Victimization by Demographics, 1976-2004.

Similar imbalances exist for homicide offending by race, sex, and age status. Again, in 1995 the homicide offending rate for African American males ages 18-24 was 300 per 100,000; the rate for white males ages 18-24 was 30 per 100,000. In other words, *the murder rate among black males ages 18-24 is one order of magnitude greater than white males ages 18-24*. A similar 10 to 1 race differential exists for males ages 14-17. In fact, the homicide offending rates for African American females are comparable to white males although the relationships are inconsistent. At certain data points, African American females had a greater homicide offending rate than white males and vice versa.

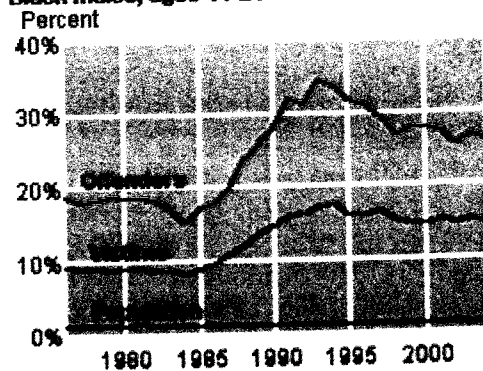
Figure 3 illustrates young males ages 14-24 (white and African American) as a proportion of the total United States population, homicide victim population, and homicide offender population spanning 1976 to 2004. During this time period, young white males constituted about 10 percent of the total population in 1976 to about 6 percent in 2004. Across the time period, young white males comprised about 10 percent of homicide victims and this rate was consistent. Young white males comprised about 18 percent of homicide offenders and this rate fluctuated between approximately 16 to 20 percent. For African American males ages 14-24 the proportions are quite different. While young African American males comprised about 1 percent of the total population, they accounted for significant numbers of homicide victims and offenders. For victims, the rate hovered at 10 percent before escalating in 1985 to a peak of nearly 20 percent in 1995 and leveling off to about 15 percent in 2004. For offenders, a similar slope is observed albeit with about twice the magnitude. Young African American males ages 14-24 accounted for about 20 percent of homicide offenders---20 times their proportion of the population from 1976 to 1985. This rate peaked in about 1993 at nearly 35 percent---35 times their proportion in the population and leveled off to about 28 percent in 2004. Of course, these data indicate nothing about the causal reasons for the staggering racial differences in homicide offending and victimization. As such, the role of moral poverty is unknown. However, the notion that young males ages 14-24 are likely to kill and be killed by means of murder is unassailable as is the fact that rates of violence are dramatically higher among African Americans than whites.

Young males as a proportion of the population, homicide victims, and homicide offenders, 1976-2004

White males, ages 14-24



Black males, ages 14-24



Source: Fox, J. A., & Zawitz, M. W. (2006). Homicide trends in the United States. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 3. Young Males and Homicide, 1976-2004.

There is great overlap between the theorized background factors of super-predators and the social histories of gang members. In the public's mind and many media depictions of youth violence, gang members are front and center. George Knox and other gang researchers from the National Gang Crime Research Center completed one of the largest, most comprehensive studies of gangs in the United States. Knox and his colleagues (2004) collected data in 17 states from 85 different correctional facilities (prisons, boot camps, juvenile institutions, etc) on a national sample of 10,166 confined offenders, of which 4,140 were self-reported gang members. Compared to youths who were not in gangs, gang members were more significantly *more likely* to:

- Self-report “super-predator” personality characteristics such as using force on another person to meet their needs,
- Have a parent who had served time in prison,
- Have psychopathic personality traits,
- Have been bullies in school,
- Have sold narcotics, especially crack cocaine,
- Have fired a gun at a police officer,
- Have been shot, stabbed, or seriously assaulted, and
- Have engaged in violent, weapons-related, and drug misconduct while incarcerated

Gang members were significantly *less likely* to:

- Finish high school or have a GED,
- Attend church,
- Avoid situations involving the risk of arrest or personal injury,
- Report that the juvenile or criminal justice system deterred them,
- Report that he or she had adequate parental supervision as a child, and
- Believe in conventional morality

Again, this report was not an official test of the super-predator thesis; however, the differences between gang and non-gang youths are striking vis-à-vis DiIulio's conceptualization. Gang members are involved in the most serious forms of criminal violence at school, on the streets, and while in custody. They self-report a personality profile that exalts impulsivity, narcissism, and the absence of empathy. Further, gang members indicated that their family background was wholly inadequate to socialize them for success in contemporary society. Instead, their childhoods were characterized by parental criminality, parental criminal justice system involvement, and parental neglect. In effect, the gang members in this study reported that they were not socialized or cared for by loved ones. The result was violent gang delinquency.

Nowhere was the super-predator thesis supported more resoundingly than from the psychopathy literature. Yet even here criminologists were eager to denounce the idea. Laurence Steinberg (2002, p. 43) suggested that “today's sense of urgency over the need to determine which offenders are genuine psychopaths has its origins in the now infamously wrong prediction about the coming wave of superpredators made by prognosticators like John DiIulio....the legacy of the superpredator lives on today in the label of the psychopath.”

Steinberg's specious essay seems to indicate that the super-predator idea is invalid, yet the behavioral repertoire of super-predators and their putative personality characteristics are textbook psychopathic behavior. What are psychopathic youths like? They have a very disagreeable personality and often are suspicious, deceptive, exploitative, arrogant, tough-minded, and aggressive. They are low in conscientiousness and constraint, which means that they impulsively seek to satisfy their own needs with no concern for the feelings of other people. Paul Frick and his colleagues studied a sample of more than 1,100 children in third, fourth, sixth, or seventh grades to examine the stability of psychopathic traits. They found that the most psychopathic children (their average age was 10 years) were highly impulsive, highly narcissistic, and highly callous and unemotional to others. Moreover, these characteristics were relatively stable over a four-year follow-up period. This suggests that psychopathic traits develop early in life and, once established, are likely to persist throughout the life course (Frick et al., 2003).

If the personality profile of psychopathic youths is troubling, the behavioral profile is even more unsettling particularly among institutionalized juvenile offenders. Mary Ann Campbell, Stephen Porter, and Darcy Santor (2004) found that psychopathic youths were among the most aggressive, antisocial, and delinquent children within detention centers. Although they were the most prone to externalizing (e.g., hurting others) problems, they were the least prone to internalizing problems (e.g., hurting themselves). In other words, psychopathic youths do not feel "stressed" about engaging in serious antisocial behavior. They also tend to have the most severe criminal records, had often been suspended or expelled from school, had multiple placements in foster homes and juvenile detention centers, and experienced more abuse during early childhood. In terms of social and behavioral history, it would be difficult to distinguish juvenile or fledgling psychopaths from super-predators.

CONCLUSION

Children who were born when DiIulio published the super-predator article would today (in 2007) be age 12. What are the contemporary crime trends? In March 2007, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) gathered crime data for 2006 from 56 policing agencies across the United States. The assessment from PERF is:

But overall, the 24-month trend, starting on January 1, 2005, is unmistakable: Among the jurisdictions filing reports with PERF, total homicides in 2006 were 10.21 percent higher than they were in 2004. Robberies increased 12.27 percent; aggravated assaults increased 3.12 percent; and aggravated assaults with a firearm increased 9.98 percent (Police Executive Research Forum, 2007, p. 1).

Law enforcement officials offered several explanations for the upsurge in violent crime, but among the most commonly cited was young people with access to guns and an willingness and at times even an eagerness to settle disputes violently. The violence was disproportionately committed by young males who dropped out of high school, were involved in the drug trade and generalized criminal activity, and who viewed even the most trivial affronts as reason enough to inflict violence (Zernike, 2007). New Orleans is a case that is useful for understanding youth violence. Long a bastion of violent crime, New Orleans was

devastated by Hurricane Katrina and its residents displaced across the country. Many New Orleans residents relocated to Houston, Texas. Unfortunately for Houston, Texas, the relocated residents included many gang members and young criminals---groups who single-handedly increased the homicide rate of Houston by 20 percent in 2006. In fact, Katrina evacuees were involved in at least 65 homicides as offender, victim, or both in Houston in 2006 (Associated Press, 2006). In the first six months that residents repopulated New Orleans, the city was rocked by several mass murders involving young people as offenders and victims---the violence stemming from criminal activity associated with the drug trade.

There is an obvious similarity between today's crime problem and the super-predator thesis advanced by John DiIulio in 1995. Then and now, young males from the most impoverished neighborhoods in the nation's largest cities disproportionately use lethal violence as a means to settle disputes, establish respect, or simply perpetuate ongoing criminal behavior. This is particularly problematic among young African American males. The homicide offending and victimization data are incontrovertible in this regard. It is well known that homicide offenders, gang members, and psychopaths---groups that appear to match the profile of super-predators are likely to come from considerable and often extreme adversity. This adversity includes child abuse victimization, poverty, family substance abuse, family dissolution, parental criminality, parental criminal justice system involvement, and the like (DeLisi, 2005). Background characteristics such as these are readily reconcilable to the idea of moral poverty. Moral poverty subsumes the oppression and disadvantaged life circumstances of young people at risk for serious violent criminal behavior. More pointedly, moral poverty seems to be an accurate way to describe how staring at another person, bumping shoulders with another person, or wearing a different color of clothing would ever justify aggravated assault, robbery, or murder.

Of course, John DiIulio was an easy target. In addition to forecasting a crime explosion during the Shangri-la crime decline of the late twentieth century, DiIulio brilliantly used the imagery of youth violence to make his point. His writing was strident and from the perspective of academic criminologists, unapologetically conservative. Any talk of increasing crime rates during an age of unprecedented public safety is appropriately ripe for ridicule. Indeed, DiIulio's thesis has taken its lumps. But the central idea of the super-predator is not misguided rhetoric, but simply a dramatic label for a violent, socially marginalized young person. Other labels that fit are murderer, gang member, chronic offender, and psychopath. To deny that these constructs exist is foolish. One must only read the newspaper each day for proof.

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