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# Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king?

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Experts and politicians- history made behind men's backs

*Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images*

This column often features the views and research of criminologists. What we have not discussed is the unusually strong **role a leader plays in homicide research**. Students of homicide generally follow Marvin Wolfgang, whose 1958 study of 588 **Philadelphia homicides** (1948-1952) provides an exemplar or model for how city homicide studies “should” be done. Even more influential is Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s (1967; 1982) **The Subculture of Violence: Toward an Integrated Theory in Criminology**. Here, the authors revised a crumbling field (see **Vold, 1958**), instituting changes in what would and would not be included in its literature, (e.g. history, mass media and forensic psychology were implicitly excluded). Henceforth, criminology would emphasize quantitative methods using arrest reports on **race**, (considered too controversial by the FBI at the time). They recommended centrally controlled, action-oriented

research, with minimal influence exerted from outside the research group. One integrated, overall theory would be accepted. And *that* was Wolfgang's (untested) theory of a black subculture of violence, with its subsidiary policy implications.

Most criminological theories evince at least some empathy or sympathy for the objects of their theories, trying, in as far as is possible, to make themselves appear non-racist. Typically theorists will, for instance, put blacks in a position not of their own making and one of despair. Not so for Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967), who claim that blacks live in a subculture of violence where violence is approved and all members of the community exhibit pro-violence values, even if they do not exhibit violent behavior. Accordingly, violence is accompanied by little or no guilt; the objects of their violence abide by the same rules, and have the same values. Wolfgang (1958) purportedly found in his earlier study that, where blacks are involved, both victims and offenders have prior arrest records and that subcultural members are involved in almost all murders (and most other types of crime). Their homicides are "crimes of passion," involving intimates and family members, identifiable motives and easily solved cases.

However, members of the dominant, white, middle-class culture are opposed to the use of violence. Aside from murders within the family, their (infrequent) murders also involve either psychopathology or premeditation. Premeditated murder requires major efforts to rationalize the killing, since their feelings of guilt are strong. The theorists claimed that the rarity of premeditation across cultures would make such cases difficult to promote and unlikely to increase, whether the murderer was treated, punished or left to his or her own devices. That being the case, Wolfgang and Ferracuti argued for the elimination of all such cases from the field of criminology and their placement in forensic psychology, while criminology would focus on blacks.

Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) said that attitude surveys would be the best test of their thesis, and that the thesis should be tested. But there are other tests, such as conflicting evidence from American history on white-on-white violence, *and* white-on-black. In fact, much of this evidence had already come to light. Yet the authors used an untested theory as the basis for recommendations so severe, one would think the theory was law. For instance, they proposed that prevention of further crimes be promoted by "social action that is designed (a) to disperse, disrupt and disorganize the representatives of the subculture of violence, and at the same time (b) effect changes in the value system" through involuntary therapy in prisons (1967, P. 315). That is, they proposed to destroy the intergenerational communication of values, to eliminate its strengths and durability, as well as its solace and the self-sufficiency developed from shared experiences of adversity. They proposed moving blacks away from their communities to separate them from each other, to put them on the outskirts of cities, amongst whites whose non-violent values would be the only ones on display. They further proposed to forcibly *infuse*

new values into prisoners' minds by inducing a state of “anomic anxiety,” confusion and regression (a “happy medium. . . between ‘brainwashing’ and repression”), likely to lead to psychosis. Then the ex-prisoners would be forced to recover on the outside without anything familiar to call home, with no one who understands what he went through and with no funds to pay for help if needed (pp. 311-312).

Shortly after publication of *The Subculture of Violence*, (according to Wolfgang & Ferracuti’s statements in their 1982 Preface), it no longer mattered whether the theory was tested, or even if it *could* be demonstrably proven. Many “untestable” ideas had proved “useful.” (Untestable ideas are not scientific ideas.) Despite little interest in the book the first year, it was bought in multiples and the ideas, vocabulary and policies for the “dispersion” of the subculture were incorporated into the final report of President Johnson’s National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1968) and into programs for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Over the next 30 years, the black subculture of violence thesis became one of the most frequently cited and least tested propositions in the literature (**Cao, Adams & Jensen, 1997**).

The primary tests of the thesis had been concerned with Southern violence. Before Cao, Adams *et al* (1997, p. 370), **Ball-Rokeach (1973)**, **Erlanger (1974)**, **Dixon and Lizotte (1987)**, **Ellison (1991)** and others had put forth progressively more sophisticated tests of the subculture of violence as a value or belief system, *and none had found support* for the thesis. The last three studies had specifically found whites to be far more likely than blacks to approve of violence. Cao, Adams *et al* used the General Social Survey (1983-1991) with a sample of 3,218 people who were asked whether or not they would approve of violence in response to offensive or defensive situations. Defensive situations tapped approval for third-party stranger violence (e.g. “would you approve of a stranger who. . . ?”). In this definitive study, white males expressed significantly more violent beliefs in “defensive and retaliatory situations” than black males. No significant racial differences were found for offensive situations.

Had Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967, 1982) been forced to comply with ethical standards as researchers in other fields are, perhaps attitude surveys would have been conducted before these members of a non-violent culture committed actions that amounted to cultural genocide. Is it any wonder that Wolfgang never said how this subculture evolved? He gave it no context or history. Consequently, blacks are blamed for the disorganization of their communities - when it may well have been the “non-violent” whites who disorganized it with a smug sense of superiority. No one has yet to complain.

This is just the beginning of the long and tragic story of violence in America.

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Serial killers: Some say they're white, others say black](#)
- [Profiling: An obstacle to curtailing serial murder](#)
- [Why profiling is unlikely to work](#)
- [How profiling was made to seem effective, how our minds encouraged that effort](#)
- [Curtailing serial murder: Modus Operandi and calling cards](#)



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