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Interracial contact and fear of crime*

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**Interracial contact and fear of crime**

**Abstract**

Despite a large literature on public views about crime, the racialization of crime, and the contact hypothesis, surprisingly little is known about how interracial friendships may influence Whites’ fear of crime. At the same time, and perhaps because no counterpart stereotype to that of “Blacks as criminals” exists, there has been little exploration of how such contact may influence Blacks’ fear of crime. To address these research gaps, this study built on prior theory and research and used data from an ABC News and Washington Post poll to test competing hypotheses about the effect of interracial contact on Whites’ and Blacks’ fear of crime, respectively. The analyses revealed that close interracial friendships are associated with increased fear of crime among Whites, decreased fear of crime among lower-income Blacks, and increased fear among higher-income Blacks. The implications for theory and research are discussed.

KEY WORDS: fear crime interracial contact
Introduction

Over fifty years ago, Gordon Allport (1954) hypothesized that close contact with people of other races and ethnicities should reduce prejudice and negative stereotypes. Given its importance for theory and policy, the contact hypothesis subsequently received considerable attention (Pettigrew, 1998) with most, though certainly not all, studies finding support for it (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Powers & Ellison, 1995; Quillian, 2006; Sigelman & Welch, 1993). Juxtaposed against this historical context is the emergence of what has been described as the racialization of crime. Beginning in the 1980s, media accounts and policy discourses increasingly equated crime and race. The result is that “White Americans tend to associate criminality with people of color and believe that most criminals come from racial minorities” (Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003, p. 400).

Given the prominence of these historical developments, scholars understandably have focused on linking the contact hypothesis and the racialization of crime to views about such issues as punitive sanctioning and the fear of crime (Chiricos, Hogan, & Gertz, 1997; Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004; Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002; Johnson, 2008; Skogan, 1998; Soss et al., 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a, 2007b). The central idea is that interracial contact should reduce stereotypes, and in turn, reduce support for punitive sanctions and fear of crime among Whites. Missing from such work to date, however, are studies that include direct measures of interracial friendships or that focus on the views of racial or ethnic minorities.

To address these research gaps and to contribute to efforts to understand how public views are shaped by interracial contact, this article builds on prior theory and research to develop competing hypotheses about the influence of such contact on Whites’ and Blacks’ fear of crime. The article’s primary theoretical focus is on the logic of the contact hypothesis and its implications for predicting Whites’ fear of crime in a historical context in which crime is highly racialized. At the same time, the article develops arguments aimed at exploring whether Blacks’ fear of crime may linked to exposure to Whites. To test these hypotheses and arguments, data
from an ABC News and Washington Post (1998) national telephone poll are examined. The article begins first by discussing prior research and developing hypotheses linked to this work. Then, after describing the data and methods, the findings are presented and their implications for theory and research are discussed.

**Theoretical and empirical background**

**Interracial contact and fear of crime among Whites**

The logic of the contact hypothesis is straight-forward: people exposed to other racial and ethnic groups should, in turn, be less likely to have stereotypes about or be prejudiced toward such groups (Allport, 1954; Dixon, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998; Quillian, 2006; Sigelman & Welch, 1993). Pettigrew and Tropp’s (2006) recent meta-analysis suggests that, in fact, the bulk of evidence strongly supports the view that “intergroup contact can promote reductions in intergroup prejudice” (p. 768). Other reviews support that assessment, in general, but also point to mixed findings—for example, some studies found that interracial contact may have no effect or may actually increase prejudice (Amir, 1976; Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005; Forbes, 1997; T. B. Smith & Boero, 2001; Stephan, 1987). A consistent finding was that, for contact to have an effect, it typically must involve the development of a friendship with someone of another race or ethnicity and the friendship ideally should be close, so as to influence not only cognitive assessments but also affective appraisals (Dixon, 2006, p. 2186; see also Briggs, 2007, p. 272; Pettigrew, 1998, p. 80). An important dimension, however, along which contact effects may vary stems from the broader societal context within which intergroup relations occur (Pettigrew, 1998). For example, while close interracial friendships may reduce stereotypes related to, say, educational performance, they do not necessarily extend to other stereotypes, and any such effect may be muted or amplified depending on societal- or local-level contexts.

For several reasons, these observations hold particular relevance for inquiries aimed at
understanding the fear of crime. First, research on the fear of crime indicates that, as with studies of interracial contact, a distinction between cognitive and affective, or emotional, appraisals should be made. As Chiricos et al. (1997, p. 109) have highlighted, the causes of a “cognitive assessment of safety or risk” may differ from those associated with the “affective state of fear” (see Otis, 2007; Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2006; Weinrath, Clarke, & Forde, 2007).

Second, one of the main contributors to public fear of crime, especially among Whites, has been the racialization of crime (Chiricos et al., 2004; Johnson, 2008). This phenomenon is historically specific to, or has been more pronounced in, recent decades, and it is one that appears to capitalize on emotional or affective appraisals. Analyses of public opinion polls have highlighted that crime was increasingly viewed as one of the most pressing problems nationally during the 1980s and 1990s (Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Roberts & Stalans, 1998). During this same period, media accounts and policy discourse increasingly equated crime with Blacks, and, conversely, Blacks with crime. The phenomenon was symbolized in by the 1988 presidential election in which George H. W. Bush criticized Governor Michael Dukakis for allowing Willie Horton to be released from prison; Horton, a Black man, had been convicted of murder and, while on furlough, raped a Maryland woman (Skogan, 1995, p. 60). During that election, crime and race were considered to be “wedge issues” that Bush leveraged to his advantage by creating an appearance that violent Black criminals were a ubiquitous threat to America.

The link between race and crime became, if anything, more pronounced in subsequent years, especially in news coverage. Fourteen years after the 1988 presidential election, for example, Gilliam et al. (2002, p. 758) noted that “a growing body of research indicates that local news relies heavily on a ‘crime news script’ that casts minority group members—and African Americans in particular—in the featured role of violent perpetrator” (see also Chiricos et al., 2004; Skogan, 1998; Soss et al., 2003). Separately, Loury (2002) observed that the problem was so pervasive that Blacks suffered from a “spoiled collective identity” (p. 67), one where crime and Blackness were intimately tied to one another. According to scholars, one result was the
enactment of numerous “get tough” laws that created tougher sanctions for minorities (Beckett & Sasson, 2000; Garland, 2001; Johnson, 2008; Pager, 2007; Roberts & Hough, 2005b; Roberts, Stalans, Indermaur, & Hough, 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a, 2007b; Western, 2006). Support for that view stems in part from studies that find a relatively direct link between support for punitive policies and the racial typification of crime. Chiricos et al. (2004, p. 369) found, for example, a positive association between support for punitive sanctions and a tendency to “typify crime as a disproportionately Black phenomenon” (p. 369).

Third, most studies to date that have focused on fear of crime and interracial contact have relied on indirect measures of contact, most notably proximity to areas with higher concentrations of Black residents. Theoretical arguments about fear of crime and interracial contact suggest that relationships with people of different races and ethnicities should increase the understanding and valuing of differences between groups, which should reduce stereotypical views and prejudice towards those groups (Allport, 1954; Gilliam et al., 2002; Pettigrew, 1998; Skogan, 1995). Empirical tests of these arguments have tended to find, as Skogan (1995, p. 69) has noted, that “among Whites, residential proximity to Black people is related to fear of crime” (see also Quillian, 2006, p. 322). Even so, some studies find that there is no link between the two (Chiricos et al., 1997, pp. 108-109), and still others find that, when a relationship does exist, it remains even after controlling for prejudicial views Whites may have about Blacks (Skogan, 1995, p. 70). Of particular relevance for the present study, however, is that such studies assume that proximity necessarily entails increased contact and also that they do not measure contact directly. Thus, it remains largely unknown whether interracial contact, as opposed to proximity, is indeed associated with Whites’ fear of crime.

Clearly, empirical studies provide support for the idea that interracial contact should increase fear of crime. A large body of research on interracial contact, however, also establishes that such contact should reduce adherence to stereotypes and prejudicial views (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). By extension, it is reasonable to anticipate that such an effect should emerge for stereotypes about Blacks and crime, and, in turn, reduce Whites’ fear of crime. Even so, some scholars have
noted that interracial contact may actually reinforce stereotypes and prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998; T. B. Smith & Boero, 2001). For example, it is possible that Whites may overstate the crime problem locally if they know Black people (Quillian, 2006, p. 322). It also may be that Whites with close Black friends may more strongly adhere to stereotypes about Blacks through a process in which they clarify that, in their view, there are two distinct groups of Blacks, those like their friends and those who fit particular stereotypes. Given these different lines of theory and research, two competing hypotheses present themselves:

**Hypothesis 1a:** Interracial contact will decrease Whites’ fear of crime.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Interracial contact will increase Whites’ fear of crime.

One factor that may account for variation in studies of Whites’ fear of crime and proximity to Blacks is the extent to which they take into account actual or perceived crime and victimization risks (Chiricos et al., 1997; Skogan, 1995). Should an interracial contact effect emerge, it might arise through the above-specified mechanisms, or it could result from proximity to areas with different crime rates, given that White communities, on average, have lower crime rates than is the case in Black communities (Alba, Logan, & Bellair, 1994). By extension, since interracial contact is more likely in areas where Whites are more proximate to Blacks, an association between contact and fear of crime might exist, but the underlying mechanism may stem from differential exposure to crime (Taylor, Schepple, & Stinchcombe, 1979). This observation gives rise to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Among Whites, any effect of interracial contact will be eliminated or reduced after controlling for proximal crime risk.

The logic of the contact hypothesis is that it should reduce Whites’ stereotypes about Blacks. At the same time, the research literature clearly establishes that such effects occur, especially when the relationships are intense or important to Whites, as occurs when the relationships are close. It thus can be anticipated that contact should reduce stereotypes about Blacks. That observation in turn points to a third hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** Net of proximal crime risk, any interracial contact effect among Whites
will be reduced after including measures of views about Blacks.

*Interracial friendship and fear of crime among Blacks*

Compared to previous studies of interracial contact that have examined its effects on Blacks (Jacobson & Johnson, 2006; Powers & Ellison, 1995; Sigelman & Welch, 1993), few have linked it to Blacks’ fear of crime. Chiricos et al. (1997) provided one of the few exceptions, and their study used an ecological measure of whether Blacks resided in predominantly White or Black neighborhoods. Notably, they found no effect, among Blacks, of residing in predominantly White neighborhoods (p. 119). By contrast, Covington and Taylor’s (1991) study of Baltimore neighborhoods found that Blacks residing in predominantly White neighborhoods were more fearful of crime than was the case among Blacks in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Reflecting on the Covington and Taylor (1991) findings, Skogan (1995) observed that it accords with the idea that “Black residents of White neighborhoods [may face] threats or harassment and more often [may be] the targets of humiliation and contempt” (p. 68). Notably, both set of findings run counter to Stinchcombe et al.’s (1980) argument that Whites and Blacks alike feel safer when they reside in or near predominantly White neighborhoods.

Such studies have not directly measured interracial contact. Rather, they typically tap into Blacks’ proximity to Whites, and so have not assessed whether actual contact with Whites influences Blacks’ fear of crime. In addition, and set against these few studies, is the fact that contact research typically finds that interracial friendships affect both Whites’ and Blacks’ attitudes and behaviors (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). It thus is reasonable to anticipate that Blacks who have close friendships with Whites may hold different views about crime than those who do not. Should an association be identified, however, it is unlikely to be related to changes in stereotypical views toward Whites given that racialized images of crime center around depictions of Blacks, not Whites, as, essentially, criminal; put differently, there is no stereotype of “Whites as criminals” to be dispelled through interracial contact. Even so, as the discussion above
indicates, prior theory and research suggest two competing hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 4a:** Interracial contact will decrease Blacks’ fear of crime.

**Hypothesis 4b:** Interracial contact will increase Blacks’ fear of crime.

In addition, and parallel to the logic in Hypothesis 2, a final hypothesis can be articulated:

**Hypothesis 5:** Among Blacks, any effect of interracial contact will be eliminated or reduced after controlling for proximal crime risk.

In analyses presented below, these hypotheses are tested. In addition, ancillary analyses are presented that explore the possibility that any identified interracial relationship effect on Blacks’ fear of crime may be linked to their proximity to lower crime, White communities.

**Data and methods**

Data for this study come from the ABC News and Washington Post (1998) Race and Crime Poll, available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (study number 2492). Conducted in June 1997 by Chilton Research Services for ABC News and the Washington Post, the poll identified households using random-digit dialing to create a nationally representative survey of adults (N=1,137). It included questions on the fear of crime, interracial contact, and social and demographic characteristics of the respondents. Question wording and response options paralleled those typically used in public opinion studies of crime (Cullen et al., 2000; Mears, Hay, Gertz, & Mancini, 2007; Roberts, 1992; Roberts & Stalans, 1998; Roberts et al., 2003; Roberts & Hough, 2005a, 2005b; Unnever & Cullen, 2007b). The timing of the survey is of particular relevance for this study since it occurred during a time when public opinion polls identified crime as one of the most critical problems facing the country (Warr, 1995) and when the racialization of crime ascended into prominence (Chiricos et al., 2004; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Gilliam et al., 2002). These data thus provide a unique source of information to test arguments about how interracial relationships among Whites and Blacks may influence their Whites’ and Blacks’ fear of crime, respectively.
The analyses focus on White and Black respondents. The survey included two questions for classifying respondents’ race and ethnicity. The first asked, “Are you of Hispanic origin or background?” Respondents who said “yes” were asked, “Are you a White Hispanic or Black Hispanic?” Those who said “no” were asked, “Are you White, Black, or some other race?” As shown in Table 1, of the 1,137 respondents, 71.2 percent (N=810) reported that they were non-Hispanic Whites, and 17.6 percent (N=200) reported that they were non-Hispanic Blacks. Although it would have been preferable to include Hispanics in this study, too few cases existed to support the statistical models used in the analyses.

**Dependent variables**

The dependent variable, fear of crime, is measured using a question similar to ones used in many public opinion studies of crime (e.g., Sims & Johnston, 2004; Taylor et al., 1979; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2007; Wanner & Caputo, 1987; Warr, 1995). Specifically, respondents were asked, “How safe do you feel when you are alone at night on your neighborhood streets?” Responses were coded as “1=very safe,” “2=somewhat safe,” “3=somewhat unsafe,” and “4=very unsafe.”

**Independent variables**

To gauge interracial contact, White respondents were asked about friendship with Blacks, and Black respondents were asked about friendship with Whites. For Whites, the question was, “Do you yourself know any Black person whom you consider a fairly close personal friend?” For Blacks, it was, “Do you yourself know any White person whom you consider a fairly close
Responses to either question were coded as “1=yes” and “0=no.” Seventy-two percent of White respondents reported having a close Black friend, and 85 percent of Black respondents reported having a close White friend, responses that fall within the percentage range typically reported in other studies (Dixon, 2006, p. 2187; see also Powers & Ellison, 1995; Smith, 1999). The higher percentage of Blacks having close friends who are White accords with prior research (e.g., Briggs, 2007, p. 274; Sigelman & Welch, 1993, p. 785), including a large body of scholarship that finds that “acceptance of interracial attitudes is much higher among African Americans than in the White community” (Jacobson & Johnson, 2006, p. 571). For example, data from a 1997 Gallup poll, the same year as the data collected for the present study, showed that 83 percent of African Americans endorsed interracial marriage, compared with 67 percent of Whites (p. 571). For this study, the interracial contact question’s reference to “close personal friend” is especially important because it avoids the more ambiguous meaning that attends to a broader focus on mere “friendship” (Briggs, 2007, p. 272; see also Dixon, 2006, p. 2180). It also is important for testing hypotheses about the effect of interracial relationships on Whites’ fear of crime given that prior work on the contact hypothesis establishes that, for an effect to arise, contact should be especially salient for individuals (Dixon et al., 2005, p. 699; see also Pettigrew, 1998, p. 76).

To determine whether any identified contact effect can be attributed to crime risk—that is, the idea that contact does not per se reduce crime but instead signifies reduced exposure to crime and victimization through residence in lower-crime areas—four items from the poll were included. The importance of examining different dimensions of risk stems both from prior scholarship highlighting that a range of cognitive and affective dimensions may influence perceptions and feelings of risk (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992) and from the fact that no identifiers were available to develop direct links to arrest rates. Use of different items related to crime, victimization, and risk provides an indirect assessment of actual risk. At the same time, two items measured perceived risk directly. All four collectively take better account of the crime context, as gauged by respondents’ cognitive appraisals, in which the respondents resided.
The first measure was community type (1=urban, 0=suburban or rural area), and tapped, at the most general level, into differential exposure to crime. It was based on responses to the following question: “Would you describe the area in which you live as a large city, suburb of a large city, small town, or rural area?” In general, crime rates typically are substantially higher in urban areas (Haghighi & Sorensen, 1996; Miethe, 1995; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000). The second was local crime problem, measured using responses to the question, “How would you rate the crime problem in your own community where you live?” (1=not bad at all, 2=not too bad, 3=bad, and 4=very bad). The third was perceived risk of victimization (1=very unlikely, 2=somewhat unlikely, 3=somewhat likely, 4=very likely). The question for this item was, “How would you rate the chances of your being a victim of a violent crime some day?” The last measure was actual victimization, based on the question, “In the last year, have you or any member of your immediate family been the victim of a crime?” (1=yes, 0=no). Each of these dimensions of risk has been linked to increased fear of crime (Bennett & Flavin, 1994; McGarrell, Giacomazzi, & Thurman, 1997; Miethe, 1995; Otis, 2007; Schafer et al., 2006; Skogan, 1995), although in some cases, such as victimization, a statistically significant, positive association has not always or consistently been identified (Unnever et al., 2007).

Finally, several measures were used to explain any remaining interracial contact effect, net of risk, among Whites. As noted earlier, the logic of the contact hypothesis is that it should reduce stereotypical and prejudicial thinking. The poll data did not include direct measures of Whites’ stereotypical views about Blacks being more likely to commit crime. It did, however, include measures that, more generally, tap into individuals’ racial tolerance, which indirectly may tap into stereotypical views, including beliefs that Blacks essentially are more criminal. One item gauged respondents’ views about discrimination—“Do you think Blacks are discriminated against in this society a lot, somewhat, a little, or not at all?” (1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=somewhat, 4=a lot). Another queried respondents about whether they thought college admission preferences for Blacks should be allowed—“Do you think Blacks and other minorities should receive preference in college admissions to make up for past inequalities, or not?” (1=they should,
A third asked respondents whether racial diversity on television was a good idea—“Do you think it’s a good thing or a bad thing for there to be entertainment programs on network television whose main characters include a mix of people of different races?” (1=good, 0=bad or neither good nor bad). In the subsequent analyses, these measures were used to assess whether they mediate the effects of interracial contact.

Control variables

In addition to these key explanatory factors, several controls—age, sex, education, income, and political orientation—typically used in studies of public opinion and crime were included in the multivariate statistical models (Chiricos et al., 2004; Cullen et al., 1998; Moon, Sundt, Cullen, & Wright, 2000; Otis, 2007; Schafer et al., 2006; Sims & Johnston, 2004; Unnever et al., 2007). Age was coded as “1=eighteen to twenty-nine,” “2=thirty to thirty-nine,” “3=forty to forty-nine,” “4=fifty to fifty-nine,” and “5=sixty or older.” Sex was coded as “1=male” and “0=female.” Individuals were asked, “What was the last grade of school you completed?” Responses were coded to create categories similar to those used in prior studies (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). A measure of income was created by combining responses from several questions. Respondents were 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 they chose “more than $30,000,” respondents could select from the following categories the one that best matched their household income: “$30,000 but less than $50,000;” “$50,000 but less than $75,000;” or “more than $75,000.” Combining the responses resulted in a measure of income with four categories (1=less than $30,000; 2=$30,000 to $49,000; 3=$50,000 to $74,000; and 4=$75,000 or more). Finally, the measure of political ideology (1= very conservative or conservative, 0=other) stemmed from the following question, “Would you say your views in most political matters are very liberal, liberal,
moderate, conservative, or very conservative?”

Analyses

The analyses began first with the Whites-only sample (Table 2). Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were used to estimate the effect of interracial contact on fear of crime. (Separate analyses were conducted using ordinal logistic regression; the results, statistically and substantively, were largely similar.) Then, in stepwise fashion, separate measures of crime and victimization risk, and finally, measures of racial tolerance, were introduced. Including perceived risk of victimization is important, given the results of studies that suggest that fear of crime in part reflects an affective state, net of cognitive appraisals of risk (Chiricos et al., 1997; Otis, 2007; Schafer et al., 2006). Next, the focus turned to the Blacks-only sample to explore whether having a close White friend is associated with Blacks’ fear of crime (Table 3). The stepwise progression used with the Whites-only sample was repeated—that is, separate measures of crime and victimization risk were included sequentially. The racial tolerance measures were not included as mediators because there is, from a review of the literature, no Whites-as-criminals stereotype to be explained. By extension, there was no reason to anticipate that interracial friendships with Whites influences racial stereotypes relevant to predicting Blacks’ fear of crime. For reasons explained below, however, the possibility that these friendships exert differential effects on lower- versus higher-income Blacks’ fear of crime was explored.

Results

Table 2 presents the results of regression analyses estimating the effect of interracial contact on Whites’ fear of crime. Inspection of Model 1 suggests support for Hypothesis 1b. Specifically, Whites who reported having close Black friends were more likely—not, as anticipated by Hypothesis 1a, less likely—to fear crime.
A basic question, however, is whether the observed association stems from a greater crime risk associated with living in or near higher-crime areas where, perhaps, contact with Blacks may be more likely. Models 2 through 5 assessed whether, individually, each of four measures of crime risk reduced the estimated contact effect. In Model 2, introduction of urban as a measure of community type produced a minimal reduction in the Black contact effect, from .29 to .27. A more substantial reduction occurred when the perceived local crime problem measure was included in Model 3. Here, the contact effect was reduced from .20, and the change in the model fit, as assessed by the adjusted R-square, increased from .07 to .23. Not surprisingly, then, the measure is strongly associated with fear of crime, with each one-unit increase in the four-point perceived crime problem measure associated with an almost half-step (.41) increase in the four-point fear of crime measure. Inclusion of the victimization risk measure in Model 4 reduced the contact only modestly, to .24, and inclusion of the victimization measure in Model 5 reduced it even less, to .26. In both cases, however, there was a strong and statistically significant effect, with those who perceived a higher risk of victimization or who experienced victimization reporting higher levels of fear. When all four measures were included, the contact effect was reduced by almost 50 percent, from .29 (Model 1) to .15 (Model 6).

Thus, in support of Hypothesis 2, the effect of interracial contact on Whites’ fear of crime appears to be driven in no small part by Whites residing in areas with higher levels of crime and victimization risk. Notably, however, a substantial contact effect remains, suggesting that other factors may contribute to the contact effect.

As argued in Hypothesis 3, one possibility, flowing from studies of the contact hypothesis, is that contact may actually reinforce stereotypes about minorities. Including measures of stereotypical views thus should reduce or eliminate any identified contact effect. To test this idea, Model 7 included three measures tapping into Whites’ views about whether Blacks
experience discrimination, whether Blacks should be given preferential treatment in college admissions to compensate for past inequalities, and whether racial diversity on television is a good idea. These items do not directly gauge whether respondents hold a stereotypical view of Blacks as being more likely to commit crime (Chiricos et al., 2004), but it is reasonable to anticipate that they would be correlated with such a view. Even so, contrary to what was hypothesized, none of the measures was associated with fear of crime and their inclusion did not reduce the estimated effect of interracial contact.

Given the dearth of attention to the potential salience of interracial friendships for Blacks’ fear of crime, the analyses turned to exploring whether a link between the two existed and, if so, whether it resulted from crime and victimization risk factors. Model 1 in Table 3 shows that, controlling for respondents’ social and demographic characteristics, having a close White friend was associated with substantially lower levels of fear. Specifically, and in support of Hypothesis 4a, among Blacks with a close White friend, fear of crime was reduced by .58, a greater than half-step reduction on the four-point fear measure. This association may be best viewed as a “friendship,” not contact, effect given that the explanation for it likely has little to do with stereotypical views Blacks may have about the criminal propensities of Whites.

As with the analyses of Whites’ fear of crime, an important question is whether any effect of having a close friend of another race stems in part or whole from exposure to areas where interaction with Whites is more likely and where, by extension, lower levels of crime may occur. Models 2 through 5 included the same crime and victimization risk measures presented in Table 2. A similar pattern of results emerged. First, inclusion of the urban measure reduced the friendship effect from -.58 to -.52; inclusion of the local crime problem measure produced a larger reduction, to -.48. Including victimization risk and victimization experience did not appreciably reduce the friendship effect, even though the two measures were statistically
significant and, as one would expect, positively associated with fear of crime. Not least, in
Model 6, which included each of the crime and victimization risk measures, the friendship effect
was more substantially reduced, from -.58 to -.42, suggesting support for Hypothesis 5. Notably,
the contact effect remained relatively large and statistically significant.

One problem, however, was that the controls may be insufficient because they only tapped
into respondents’ views about crime in their immediate neighborhood, not that of nearby or
adjacent communities that they may frequent. That is, the measures did not directly gauge the
racial composition or crime rates of the respondents’ communities or that of neighboring
communities. The data did include, however, a measure of income, and since income is a key
factor related to housing (Goering & Feins, 2008; LaMore, Link, & Blackmond, 2006), it was
used here to explore an indirect test of Hypothesis 5 by interacting interracial contact with
income. The speculation was that higher levels of income may enable Blacks to obtain housing
in or near predominantly White communities, and thus any friendship effect may be amplified
since it would, by this logic, simply serve—in the case of higher-income Blacks—as a proxy
measure of residing in or near lower-crime communities. By contrast, among lower-income
Blacks, interracial friendship may confer little by way of fear-reducing effects since such
individuals may not be able to obtain housing in or near predominantly lower-crime, White
communities.

Model 7 in Table 3 presents results of the interactional analysis. Due to the limited number
of cases in the highest income category, a three-category income measure was used. The
interaction was statistically significant. It is easier to interpret the interaction when viewed
graphically. For this reason, the predicted values from the different combinations of the contact
and income measures, setting all other covariates at their means, were presented. The pattern in
figure 1 is striking. Among lower-income Blacks, interracial friendship was associated with a
substantially reduced fear of crime, lending support to Hypothesis 4a. Specifically, their
reported fear of crime (2.14), as compared to that of Blacks with no close White friend (2.96),
was 28 percent lower. By contrast, among higher-income Blacks, such friendship was associated
with increased fear (1.93 versus 1.10), which lends support to Hypothesis 4b.

Before concluding, speculation about what may account for this pattern is warranted. Among lower-income Blacks, those who reported having no close White friends may have resided in considerably more disadvantaged communities than those who reported having White friends, or they may have resided in areas farther from predominantly White areas, ones where the relative amount of crime was substantially lower. In comparison, lower-income Blacks with White friends may have resided closer than other lower-income Blacks to predominantly White communities and thus, by extension, felt safer due to perceived or objectively lower rates of crime in such communities. Such a possibility is anticipated by studies of “bridging”—that is, the ways in which friendships sometimes cut across social divides. Briggs (2007, p. 285), for example, noted that race and income divides may be transcended by geographic proximity:

Lower-status minorities are more likely to live in racially segregated neighborhoods and, if they are employed, to work in racially segregated workplaces. Yet those who do report having White friends are those who social worlds also include people of comparatively higher status and influence, for example, business owners and community leaders. *Less educated, lower-income Blacks . . . who “bridge” on one important dimension (race) often bridge on others (economic status and community influence) as well.* (Emphasis added.)

Among higher-income Blacks, interracial friendships may have been associated with increased fear of crime because they may have resided in or near transitional zones—including areas in which gentrification was occurring (O’Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan, 2007; Wilsem, Wittebrood, & Graaf, 2006)—adjacent to predominantly White communities. Consider, for example, that higher-income Blacks with no close White friends may have resided in predominantly, and generally wealthier, Black communities that may have had the resources to insulate themselves from crime through geographic and social separation. By contrast, higher-
income Blacks with close White friends may have resided in housing on the periphery of or near predominantly White and wealthier communities due in part to the fact that substantial gaps between wealthy Whites and Blacks may have existed (Alba et al., 1994). Thus, among wealthy Blacks, those who resided closer to Whites may have increased their exposure, by dint of residing in or near transitional zone communities, to higher crime rates, a situation endemic to many metropolitan areas in the country (Mears & Bhati, 2006). These possibilities echo the view expressed by Chiricos et al. (1997, p. 124) that the effects of interracial proximity may be historically and spatially contingent, with added caveat that social and economic class may also influence the types and effects of proximity and interracial relationships.

Conclusion

The motivation for this study stemmed from the observation that much remains unknown about factors that influence the fear of crime, and that one prominent gap in research to date has been a focus on interracial contact. That gap stands out because of the racialization of crime in recent decades, especially during the 1990s (Garland, 2001; Gilliam et al., 2002; Tonry, 2004). Drawing on contact theory, this study presented hypotheses about the effect of interracial contact on Whites’ fear of crime, and examined the extent to which any identified effect could be explained both by crime and victimization exposure, including cognitive appraisals of risk, and by racial views. The focus on cognitive appraisals derived from literature that highlighted fear as constituting a largely affective state related to but also separate from cognitive assessments of the risk of victimization (Chiricos et al., 1997; Otis, 2007; Schafer et al., 2006). At the same time, the study explored, on different grounds, whether interracial friendship might be linked to Blacks’ fear of crime, and speculated that any identified effect likely would be due to proximity to White, lower-crime communities. To test these ideas, data from a national telephone survey of adults conducted in 1997 by ABC News and the Washington Post (1998) were analyzed.

The analyses revealed that, after controlling for social and demographic characteristics of the
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respondents, interracial contact is associated with greater fear of crime among Whites. According to some studies of the contact hypothesis, such an effect might arise by reinforcing negative stereotypes that Whites may have about Blacks. That possibility is lent greater plausibility by the fact that, during the same period of time in which the survey data for this study were collected, racialized views of Blacks as criminals were widespread in the media and in policy discourses (Garland, 2001; Gilliam et al., 2002; Tonry, 2004). In such a context, interracial contact might indeed amplify rather than diminish racial stereotypes, especially if the contact involved close friendships deemed by respondents to be the exception rather than the rule (T. B. Smith & Boero, 2001; Pettigrew, 1998). The analyses revealed, however, that about 50 percent of the association between interracial contact and Whites’ fear of crime was eliminated after including measures of crime and victimization risk, suggesting that contact effects may be overstated if perceptions of community context are not taken into account. Notably, the effect was not further diminished when measures of racial tolerance were introduced, a finding that parallels that of studies 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 those who are more distant” (Skogan, 1995, p. 70). In short, the estimated net contact effect may not necessarily result from reinforcement of stereotypes that assume Blacks essentially are criminals or are substantially more likely to be criminals, but rather may emerge from some other process. Perhaps, for example, close friendships with Blacks affords Whites the opportunity to learn that crime may be more prevalent than they might otherwise think, and thus increase their fear.

The analyses of Blacks revealed an opposite effect of interracial friendship—among Blacks with close White friends, fear of crime was lower. Closer inspection of the data suggested, however, that friendship was associated with decreased fear of crime among poor Blacks and increased fear of crime among relatively wealthy Blacks. This pattern might emerge in a situation where poor and wealthy Blacks, respectively, reside in different types of areas proximate to Whites. The result in both instances would be increased contact with Whites. Among poor Blacks, however, the proximity might be to areas where crime rates are lower than
their own. By contrast, among relatively wealthier Blacks, the proximity might be to areas where crime rates are lower than their own and to areas, including their own, where crime rates may be greater than those in communities where wealthy Blacks with no close White friends reside. Transitional zones in urban areas, for example, frequently provide higher-end housing, through a process of gentrification, for individuals who lack the resources to obtain housing squarely within upper-income neighborhoods (O’Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan, 2007; Wilsem et al., 2006). Such areas bring with them greater access to downtown metropolitan areas and to more amenities, but they also provide greater exposure to crime. This study lacked measures that would directly test these possibilities, and so, as explanations for the findings, must be viewed with appropriate caution (see, however, Chiricos et al., 1997).

This study’s unique contribution lies in tapping into direct measures of interracial contact and, in turn, examining how such contact may influence, respectively, Whites’ and Blacks’ fear of crime. The pattern of results—an increase in fear of crime among Whites and upper-income Blacks and a decrease in fear of crime among lower-income Blacks—is striking and underscores the need for careful investigation of the processes that may give rise to them. In part, the findings accord with other studies that have focused on indirect measures of interracial contact, such as research on the effects of ecological-level measures (e.g., percent Black) on Whites’ fear of crime (Chiricos et al., 1997; Covington & Taylor, 1991; Gilliam et al., 2002; Liska, Lawrence, & Sanchirico, 1982; Taylor et al., 1979). For example, Skogan’s (1998) analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) revealed 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). Yet, such studies typically have had to make assumptions about what such proximity entails and so have not shown directly how personal, direct contact with other races influences an individuals’ fear of crime. The logical next step is for studies to integrate the two approaches—that is, to include measures of proximity to other racial groups and measures of actual interracial contact. More broadly, there is a need for studies that put interracial contact into context, especially given that a number of studies suggest that contact exerts a different effect depending on such factors.
as the quantity and quality of contact, adherence to stereotypes prior to any contact, and the settings in which contact occurs (Briggs, 2007; Dixon, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998).

Additional avenues of research are indicated as well. For example, as with many prior studies, the data on which this study drew lacked measures that might more directly tap into mediating pathways through which interracial contact influences fear of crime. To illustrate, a potentially better alternative to the use of racial tolerance measures, such as those on which this study relied, might be questions that asked respondents to report on stereotypical views of Blacks and crime (Chiricos et al., 2004). Similarly, and with respect to the findings concern Blacks’ fear of crime, measures that tap into the racial, ethnic, crime, and other social and demographic characteristics of respondents’ communities and those proximate to them would provide a stronger foothold for drawing inferences about ways in which interracial contact effects may vary across different social contexts (Bennett & Flavin, 1994; Otis, 2007; Quillian, 2006; Schafer et al., 2006; Skogan, 1995).

Even so, the findings from this study are notable because the estimated effects of interracial contact persist among both Whites and Blacks despite the inclusion of a range of factors, including those, such as perceived risk of victimization and prior victimization, that typically are strong predictors of the fear of crime. Future research ideally will be able to determine if in fact interracial contact influences fear of crime among Whites, Blacks, and other racial, as well as ethnic, groups. At the same time, it ideally will determine if the effects vary across groups. Not least, it will investigate whether identified effects, whether similar or different, arise through similar or different mechanisms. Such lines of inquiry offer the possibility not only of increasing knowledge of how interracial social networks influence individuals’ view but also of highlighting ways in which harmful racial and ethnic stereotypes may be combated.
Notes

1. The methodology used by the ABC News and Washington Post is described in the codebook for the June 1997 study (number 2492) and in descriptions of similar polls the two organizations have conducted on a regular basis since 1981. The polls, used in a variety of social science research (e.g., Sigelman & Welch, 1993), can be accessed at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (www.icpsr.umich.edu).

2. In the recoded version, “1=income less than $30,000,” “2=$30,000 to $49,999,” and “3=$50,000 or more” (mean=1.84, s.d.=.85). Substantively, the pattern of results paralleled those produced from using the four-category version of the income measure.
References


LaMore, R. L, Link, T., & Blackmond, T. (2006). Renewing people and places: Institutional investment policies that enhance social capital and improve the built environment of


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

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Notes: Means are presented with standard deviations in parentheses.
Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Whites’ Fear of Crime on Interracial Contact

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* p < .05     ** p < .01     *** p < .001
Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Blacks’ Fear of Crime on Interracial Contact

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* p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001
Figure 1. Fear of Crime among Blacks: Interracial Contact and Income Interaction

Fear of Crime

Lower Income  Middle Income  Upper Income

No White Friend 2.96  White Friend 2.14  No White Friend 2.03  White Friend 2.04  White Friend 1.93  No White Friend 1.10