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It's Not Just Black and White: How Black Immigrants Continue to Influence the Fight against Police Violence

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Abstract

The May 25, 2020 killing of George Floyd became one of the most recognized symbols of police brutality throughout the United States and the world. Protests following Floyd's death sparked national and global conversations about systemic racism and aggressive policing, while simultaneously referencing and reflecting on past incidents of police violence involving members of the Diaspora. Although deemed lost and forgotten by the mainstream media, it was not forgotten by Afro-immigrants and their communities. This article discusses the unique status of Black immigrant victims and explores the complexity of being Black and immigrant within America's complex racial binary criminal justice system. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it explores how Black immigrants are reshaping residential urban landscapes and consequently the Black population. More specifically, focusing on how Black immigrants have influenced and continue to influence the fight for social justice against police violence. Secondly, as a result, this article seeks to contribute to traditional discourses on police violence by integrating components of multiculturalism to properly discuss the complexities of race, ethnicity, and nativity.

Introduction

The role race, ethnicity, and nativity play in policing urban spaces are limited in the public conversations on police reform and social movements. Adding to this limitation is the failure to capture the interactions of non-Hispanic immigrant groups in their dealings with the police, therefore, underscoring the racial and ethnic hierarchy that exists in immigration and policing. Ira Reid's, *The Negro Immigrant* (1939) is one of the first few early social research examples that attempted to contextualize what it means to be Black and immigrant in America. Reid recognized how Black immigrants were treated differently by African Americans because of differences in social backgrounds. He explained that the immigrant is partially assimilated into a group/status where the immigrant becomes part of a socially restricted population where race or color is a primary social factor. Reid further explained, "Neither the immigrant nor the native is accepted as part of the dominant white society" (1938, pg. 414). Applying Reid's points, race or color is a leading social factor that plays a critical role in both immigration and policing. Unlike other immigrant groups, Black immigrants are more likely to encounter the same history of social exclusion as African Americans thus confirming Reid's assertions. The racial history of slavery and colonization of Black immigrants makes them more susceptible to racial discrimination also supporting Reid's claim that an immigrant's race or color has an additive effect on social exclusion.

At present, this is illustrated in the pervasive killings of unarmed Black persons by the police. This article explores how Black immigrants have reshaped and influenced residential urban landscapes, which I argue, as a result, directly correlates with the fight for justice against police violence. Consequently, this article seeks to expand traditional discourses on police violence by advocating for a multicultural perspective in explaining police violence and the complexities of being Black and immigrant. I argue that immigrants, are located and defined by race, ethnicity, and nativity which when intersected increases their vulnerability. The omission of cases including Black immigrants in the mainstream conversations on police violence ignores the history and the challenges faced by Black immigrant and undocumented groups, especially within urban spaces. With no adequate comprehensive data on Black immigrants killed or brutalized by the police, this article further asserts, social justice and equity for victims of police violence will continue to highlight the injustices for American-born citizens, ignoring other racial and ethnic experiences.

Explanations on Nativity, Space, and Crime

Historically, immigration in urban epicenters have become to be associated with social issues. The relationship between immigrants and crime is ubiquitous by early images of American cities plagued by overcrowding, tenement housing overflowing with an influx of European immigrants, and public health-related outbreaks of cholera. According to Gottdiener, Hutchinson, & Ryan (2015) the move to cities expressed in the literature is analogous with the negative perceptions of social problems caused by racial exclusion, poverty, and other structural forms of uneven development that influenced one's life chances. Therefore empirically asserting that environmental and social factors inadvertently influence our way of life. Gottdiener et al. (2015) would continue to explain that because of the dense population, complex built-in environment, and the scale of changes in compositional factors, metropolitan areas, unlike suburban areas, are more likely to be faced with social problems. This relationship between immigration and crime would later lead to theoretical and criminological interests in explaining crime across major U.S. cities.

Galvanized by ecological explanations of crime and violence in urban areas, theories such as Shaw and McKay's (1942) popular social disorganization theory focused on the effects immigration plays on neighborhood and crime. Developed in the twentieth century, this theoretical perspective emerged in response to a steady increase in juvenile delinquency in densely populated urban spaces. The theory posits that high levels of crime are prone to clustered or densely populated areas occupied by heterogeneous groups, thus reinforcing stigmatized ideas of racial and ethnically diverse spaces. Another influential ecological examination of crime and violence in urban areas is from the well-known sociologist Frederic Milton Thrasher. *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (1927) is regarded as the first major comprehensive empirical sociospatial investigation on gangs and gang activity in Chicago. In the study, Thrasher explains the development of gangs is in response to the social consequences of one's space or simply stating the activities by gangs are determined by their environment.

In response to the traditional explanations of crime in urban areas, there would be new interests examining the relationship between immigration and crime its effect on urban areas. For example, Butcher & Piehl's (1998) study explains that since immigration is "geographically concentrated" concerns about the criminal justice impact on immigration is related to the costs associated with expenditures in major metropolitan areas. In their study, they used the FBI Uniformed Crime Report (UCR) data to perform a cross-sectional analysis of 43 major metropolitan areas during the 1980s. Their results revealed that cities with the highest concentration of immigrants i.e. New York, Los Angeles, and Miami were also high crime areas making the relationship between immigrants and crime a bit more complicated. Adding to this complication is that immigrant groups, unlike other groups, have been used as scapegoats to explain an increase in crime rates which resembles some aspects of the social disorganization theory.

Debunking the myth that immigration is not linked to crime, contemporary scholars began to shift their attention to the growing number of immigrants in the criminal justice system or assessing whether or not crime is tied to the organization of spaces occupied by immigrants. In the latter, modifications to the social disorganization perspective would be referenced to explain how crime is related instead to changes in neighborhood conditions, more specifically poverty and heterogeneity (Davies and Fagan 2012). I argue that the complexity of this relationship is influenced by various ecological characteristics associated with urban neighborhoods that include social disadvantage, residential segregation, and social control. For example, scholars have shown that metropolitan spaces with high minority populations are associated with high levels of residential segregation, and "older metropolitan regions tend to have higher segregation" (Scopilliti & Iceland, 2008, p. 556). Taking these urban social factors into account, it becomes lucidly evident that relying on macro-level analyses of geography and crime does not adequately capture the relationship between space and violence. Furthermore, these measurements of social disadvantage are rarely examined within the context of black immigrants, let alone within the larger context of police violence. In response, contemporary research on immigrants offers varying perspectives by reframing the traditional criminogenic narrative of immigrants, leading to multicultural discourse that looks at immigrants as victims and not criminals within geographical spaces.

Why Black Immigrant Identity Matters?

The foreign Black population is responsible for a large growing segment of America's Black population. According to a 2015 Pew Research study projections, by 2060, immigrants will make up 16.4 percent of the overall Black population in the United States. Also in 2017, the U.S. foreign-born population living in the United States reached a 44.4 million record, and in 2016, the Black immigrant population rose to 4.2 million, a fivefold increase from 1980 (Anderson & Lopez, 2018). To add more context, between 2000 and 2016, the Black African immigrant population more than doubled from 574, 000 to 1.6 million which equals 39 percent of the Black foreign-born population. Moreover, in the same year, roughly half of all foreign-born Blacks were from the Caribbean according to the same Pew Study.

These numbers indicate the rapidly growing voluntary migration of Black immigrants in recent years who like other immigrant groups are in search of safety, freedom, opportunity. Statistically, the influx of Caribbean and African immigrants has greatly influenced both the racial and ethnic landscapes of major urban spaces. With New York being home to the largest ethnic mosaic of both African and Caribbean Black immigrant populations, many Africans, for example, flock to immigrant ethnic enclaves like *Little Senegal* in West Harlem and many from the Caribbean to Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Flatbush, Canarsie, or Crown Heights. The Black immigrant population is integral in reshaping the social, economic, and political characteristics in African American communities, as seen by the presence of local shops that offer cultural services and assistance that fits the needs of community residents. Where immigrants live matters, especially in the context of major American cities where neighborhoods are not diverse solely by race, but also by ethnicity and economics.

Overall, large American cities are a product of immigrants and the migration patterns of immigrant groups as demarcated by ethnic enclaves. Despite these ethnic differences, the cultural heritage of immigrant groups is excluded in discussions about the challenges they face when navigating these communities that historically has a long history of being over-policed, and over surveilled. In the context of policing in America, race bears more heavily than ethnicity, as observed in the collection and interpretation of statistical data measuring discrimination or victimization in which persons are defined mainly by salient characteristics (color). When applied to Black immigrant populations, it is crucial to distinguish the differences between race and ethnicity to not obscure and generalize what it means to be Black in America.

In this article, race is articulated as a social construct that defines people socially, politically, and economically because of salient phenotypical differences. In contrast, ethnicity is a socio-historical construct that defines people by cultural identifiers such as language, religion, and food. Accordingly, the reader must understand that ethnicity can also increase one's vulnerability or criminalization. For instance, the spike in violence against Muslims and Muslim enclaves post-9/11 or Trump's termination of the crucial Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians displaced by the 2010 earthquake and Hurricane Matthew in 2015. These examples confirm that minority status, when coupled with other socioeconomic identification markers (racial or ethnic), increases surveillance or violent methods of social control, especially for darker-skinned immigrants.

It is Not Simply Black or White

There is a lack of scholarship and existing comprehensive data that documents incidents of violence against Black immigrants, which in itself is a problem. More problematic is that much of the scholarship and data on police violence operates within an American racial binary system, ignoring ethnic/cultural differences, therefore, placing the African American plight for justice at the forefront. In other instances, the literature *Americanizes* the experiences of Black immigrants by comparing their experiences of discrimination or racial injustice to an American citizen overlooking the double stigmatized status Black immigrants occupy and/or the criminalizing of one's citizenship status. By *Americanizing* the Black immigrant experience, it underscores the centrality of racial, cultural, and ethnic characteristics that importantly defines immigrant groups. The *Americanization* of immigrant experiences not only omits these characteristics, it also produces a monolithic racial, social injustice, or socioeconomic category that groups all police violence experiences the same. Farzan (2019) highlighted this in her article about police violence against undocumented immigrant Ismael Lopez, who died during the execution of a search warrant. According to Farzan (2019), Mr. Lopez did not have a "legally recognized relationship with the United States," which did not offer him protection under the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments.

Another example is the 2016 police shooting of an unarmed Ugandan immigrant and former refugee, Alfred Olango who was shot and killed by two El Cajon, San Diego police officers after his sister, Lucy Olango, called for an emergency psychiatric assistance. The idea that all police violence involving minority groups shares the same narrative or oppression inaccurately captures the Black and undocumented immigrant experiences.

Members of the African and Afro-Caribbean diaspora galvanized by the murder of George Floyd's rallied together with African Americans to protest against police violence and the social injustices in minority-based communities. What followed was a wave of widespread activism, bolstered by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and a series of intergenerational conversations about racism in America, and critical analyses on race-based policing. More importantly, the death of George Floyd would also introduce many Americans to West African immigrant Kidiatou Diallo. As Black mothers felt the pain of Floyd's cries to his deceased mother, one mother, in particular, relived her sadness twenty-two years after her son was shot 41 times inside the vestibule of his Bronx apartment building. In her *CBS Good Morning* interview with Gayle King, Kadiatou Diallo, the mother of Amadou Diallo said, "Every mother heard him. We heard George Floyd. We hear him." The fight for racial justice and against racism by Black Americans also resonated with the historical racial parallels under colonialism for many Black Caribbean and African immigrants. Illustrating the unique status of Black immigrants, Black immigrants can both self-identify ethnically and by dominant group membership. More importantly, before the development of the BLM movement, Diallo's death and the 1997 heinous sexual assault of Haitian immigrant, Abner Louima inside the 70th precinct in Brooklyn served as critical catalysts in the fight for racial and social justice. Each case would also signify the precarious location of Black immigrants living inside traditional urban minority communities that has a long history of race based policing.

Despite the social significance of these two prolific cases of police violence, many African Americans have limited knowledge about incidents of police violence and terror against the Black immigrant community, especially among migrants and refugees. This lack of awareness could be attributed to how American society formally and informally defines 'Blackness.' As more Afro-Caribbean and African immigrants encounter anti-black discrimination, and racial prejudices across various social institutions, the feeling of 'Blackness' is an amorphous informal experience that is not experienced by all members. Whereas, when anti-discrimination and racial prejudices are exercised formally in social institutions (e.g. education or law), 'Blackness' is felt and understood by those who saliently identify as Black. Moreover, in rare instances, African Americans may confuse or incorrectly associate the identity of one immigrant case with the other especially, well-known police violence cases in New York City (Fertig & O'Grady, 2017). Although prevalent, many are still unaware that Black immigrants are more likely to be detained for criminal convictions than the overall immigrant population, and are more likely to be deported due to a criminal conviction, as cited, by Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI). These omissions restrict the scope and range of analysis, consequently placing more attention on police violence of U.S. citizens of color.

Citizenship by Death

Jamaican-born Ramarley Graham and Saheed Vassell, and Saint Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands-born Akai Gurley, Haitian immigrant David Felix, and Haitian-American Patrick Dorismond are the names of a few victims of police brutality in New York City neighborhoods. In nearly all of these narratives, calls for justice have extended internationally as the demand for justice still looms in abeyance years later despite the popularity of the BLM movement and cries for social justice on social media platforms. The above cases all share in common is the harsh truth, that racial and ethnically diverse urban spaces are more surveilled, and residents living in these communities are more likely to be harassed by the police. In 2019, the New York Civil Liberties Union reported that precincts with higher concentrations of African and Caribbean populations, according to the American Community Survey, had higher use of aggressive force during stop-and-frisk encounters between 2014 and 2017. In the same report, the data also suggests that Blacks and Latinos were also disproportionately stopped regardless of the demographic make-up of their neighborhoods.

Unlike the Latinx communities, Black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa are defined by the rigid social construction of America's black and white binary racial model as demonstrated before as *Americanizing* the social experiences of immigrants.

By ignoring the influence of immigrants and the role of immigrants in America's fight for racial justice and social equity, we are simultaneously ignoring the intersections of race, ethnicity, and nativity on policing. The following two cases recognize the importance and unique relationship of this intersection.

The death of Amadou Diallo would become one of the most widely referenced and publicized cases of police violence against unarmed Black men. For this paper, I contend also that Amadou would be the first major *Americanized* foreign-born incident of police brutality that was adopted and used to shape contemporary discussions of police brutality and police accountability. More than 20 years ago, unarmed Amadou Diallo was shot 41 times by four plainclothes NYPD police officers in the vestibule of his Bronx apartment building, after officers thought Mr. Diallo was reaching for a gun and not his wallet. The incident drew national protests and local protests in New York City involving prominent figures such as Reverend Al Sharpton, former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, and several celebrities (Christopher, 2002). For example, on June 4, 2000, singer Bruce Springsteen debuted his new song *American Skin* (41 Shots) which was released after the four officers were acquitted on murder charges.

In addition to the national conversation about race and systemic racism in policing Diallo's death would spark this case also highlighted the increased danger Black immigrants face. Not included in these conversations is the lack of justice for non-citizens, despite being killed and victimized by members of the criminal justice system just the same as American citizens. On May 22, 2003, Burkina Faso immigrant Quasane Zonga was fatally shot by NYPD officer, Bryan Conroy during a CD and DVD counterfeit raid operation in Chelsea, NY. This case contains two critical areas that need further examining. First, how anti-piracy laws disproportionately target Black immigrants is pivotal. The enforcement of anti-piracy and anti-counterfeiting laws by local, state, and federal agencies are without controversy. The clandestine channels for piracy and counterfeit goods are associated with the black market street sales of these items inside ethnic enclaves such as Canal Street, China Town, or by African vendors on 125th Street or Malcolm Shabazz Market in Harlem. Moreover, the criminalization of nonviolent crimes like bootlegging represent one of the many regulatory struggles stemming from one's immigration status. Second, what is the nexus between policing and immigration laws? A 2014 report by the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) found that despite Black immigrants making up only 7.2% of the non-citizen population, they make up 20.3% of immigrants facing deportation on criminal grounds. Furthermore, immigrants who are facing deportation do not have the right to free legal counsel.

While the above cases do not represent all incidents of police killings of unarmed Black immigrants, it reinforces the idea that conversations on police violence cannot operate primarily under a racial binary model. In a 2016 *Time* magazine publication, Alfred Olango's mother, Pamela Benge affirms this point by stating "Yes, we are refugees, but it doesn't justify that we should be killed because of being refugees." As presented, we see Black immigrants who do not make up the formal or mainstream markets are more vulnerable to increase scrutiny and harassment. When combined with one's undocumented or illegal status, the idea of justice can become elusive for families. Also not discussed publicly, are the lives of the families living overseas or the difficulties families are faced with accessing travel documents to enter the U.S., especially during the Trump administration. Policy changes under his administration led to a sharp decline in the number of Black immigrants entering America, consequently reducing the number of Africans seeking asylum. These examples of changed immigration enforcement and policies compound the social experiences of being Black and immigrant, which this paper argues should be discussed more in the discourses on policing and criminal justice reform.

Conclusion

The interactive relationship between race, space, and place is well documented for African Americans on conversations about policing in America. Despite the recent contributions by scholars, there still exists a gap in the literature and mainstream platforms about this interactive relationship regarding immigrant groups. Instead of expanding on popular historical and contemporary tropes and rhetoric, this article rejects the prejudicial labeling of immigrants as criminals, and alternatively examined immigrants as victims of the criminal justice and immigration systems. As referenced throughout this paper, conversations on immigration are geographic because of densely populated immigrant communities or ethnic enclaves scattered across the U.S. Although Black immigrants have reshaped urban landscapes and communities, discussions about the growing victimization of Black immigrants are noticeably absent publicly or in some cases compared to similar incidents involving African Americans.

Additionally, available evidence on officer-involved shootings focuses on the killings and experiences of Black American citizens overlooking the fatal encounters experienced by Black immigrants or immigrants of color.

In this sense, this paper also contends that consolidating black police violence together obscures the notable differences between African Americans and Black immigrants. The available evidence on officer-involved shootings in mainstream discourse is widely focused on the African American population, undercounting fatal encounters among other racial and ethnic groups despite the exponential growth and patterns of immigrant groups. The ultimate purpose of this essay is to raise the profile of Black immigrants by applying cultural and ethnic contexts in the reframing of discussions on police reform and police violence.

It is imperative to ‘de-Americanize’ the scholarship on police violence and examine police violence using a multicultural intersectional framework, forgoing the adopted racial binary model. Moving forward, scholarship on police violence should explicitly identify and discuss the precarious status of Black immigrants as a result of their different identities. The cases referenced explain why this is important since Black immigrants are criminalized not only by the police but by immigration laws and policies. To accurately capture police violence and race-based policing in the U.S., better local, state, and federal measure should be taken to identify immigrant subgroups. Only when completed can we have restorative justice and justice for all persons of color.

See also: Black Immigrants; Police Violence; Social Movements; Citizenship

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