

LIFE / SOCIETY &amp; CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

# Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king? Part 2

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Some scientists make true discoveries

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In the previous article (please see “[Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king?](#)”), we introduced Wolfgang, whose empirical (1958) work on homicides, and theoretical work ([Wolfgang, ed., 1967](#); [Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967](#)) on the black subculture of violence, provides the foundation, and limits the scope, for much of homicide research. Today, [Wolfgang’s \(1958\)](#) quantitative (statistical) study of Philadelphia homicides continues to provide the model for the large body of city studies both here and abroad. Shrouded beneath this emulative aggregate, omitted in the history and criminology textbooks, is a can of worms: Wolfgang’s use of arrest reports. This is a data source that, until recently, almost all scholars outside of criminology (e.g. experimental psychologist, [Albert Bandura, 1973](#)) and almost all within it (e.g. [Sparks & Hood, 1970](#); [Cressey, 1957](#); [Quinney, 1964](#)) agreed was “probably the most unreliable and most

difficult of all social statistics” (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, p. 29). Even psychologists such as Bandura took it for granted that the police, as representatives of the middle and upper classes and from whom police reports come, practice differential enforcement of the laws, so statistics, particularly in regard to race and class, are at best a suspect source of information.

According to Sutherland and Cressey’s classic criminology textbook, (1978, pp. 51-52), “The police constantly break the laws. The laws of arrest are rigidly limited, but some police officers exercise their authority with little reference to these limitations and in violation of laws. If illegal arrests are regarded as kidnappings, then the number of kidnappings by the police is thousands of times as great as the number of kidnappings by burglars and robbers. The courts, similarly, are not immune from criminal contagion, . . . .” The authors repeatedly warn against the use of crime statistics provided by the police because the view they give is distorted; it does not reflect the high number of crimes or the wide proportion of the population committing them. They make it appear that crimes by minorities and the poor are far greater than they are.

The intention of police reports as a data source was explained by Geis (1965, p. 30): “Most statistical reports which attempt to convey a picture of the illegal behavior of different segments within a society employ *arrest statistics for this purpose*.” Any group believed to be crime-prone will be more heavily patrolled than others, and heavily patrolled areas where residents are presumed to be criminals will generate higher crime rates - not because more crimes are committed but because of the actions of the police (Geis).

In order to make arrest reports more widely accepted and used, Wolfgang financed Curtis’ (1969, 1974) contribution to *Crimes of Violence, A Staff Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*, Vol. 11, a 17-city study of four crimes, which used arrest reports and, for the first time ever, reported national-level data on race of offender by race of victim.

Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967, pgs. 11-12) made several more significant efforts to ensure the success of the subculture of violence theory - that blacks value violence, while whites abhor it. The first was Wolfgang’s use of arrest reports (Wolfgang, 1958) - knowing that in criminology, the methods one uses determines what one finds. Then Wolfgang and Ferracuti imposed a sort of enforced consensus within groups in *The Subculture of Violence*, wherein they wrote out what criminologists would have to do: “From the standpoint of theory: 1. [Group] Acceptance of a unified overall theory” and that theory, Wolfgang had already determined, would be his black subculture of violence. They set forth more specifics, including acceptance of definitions of concepts, acceptance of which methods to use, etc.

Then Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967, pg. 11) lay down the following three guidelines (“From the

standpoint of group functioning”) which demonstrate the lack of interest in independent thinking and an ethical orientation in research: “[1.] Minimum influence on research plans and operations exerted from outside the research team. [2.]Willingness of participants to subordinate their own methods and interests to achieve project aims. And [3]. Publication of research reports by the group as a whole rather than by individual members.”

It is by means of [1] that no one can intervene to stop Wolfgang’s policy proposal - the total destruction of black culture, and it is by means of [3] that no one would be held accountable for such harmful group deeds.

Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967, p. 289) also proposed a “master plan” where there would be no “isolated or uncoordinated research” with the plan containing only “coordinated, centrally controlled, and integrated research.” A variety of “active research designs, attractive to both the intellectual community of scholars and the agents of public decision, could be piloted throughout the country in such a way that all of them would be integrated into a macroscopic schema of testing, evaluating and weighting of the results.” Each “attack” would be evaluated in terms of its ability to control and reduce violence.

In a study comparing Stockholm and Philadelphia ([Wikstrom, 1991](#)), one of the most important findings reported is the rarity of offenders having previous criminal records in Stockholm, in contrast to their purported prevalence in Philadelphia (Wolfgang, 1958). Before Wolfgang, most studies had shown murderers to be first time offenders, and they were known to be the best risks for parole (Stanton, 1969). But Wolfgang made a point of making blacks appear to be responsible for crimes of all sorts which makes them seem much more reprehensible.

Why would Wolfgang want to do this? Perhaps the answer lies in his (Wolfgang, ed., 1967, p. 4) most obviously anti-democratic and race-related statement pertaining to how he perceives white versus black murderers and their rightful penalties (or lack thereof): Wolfgang acknowledged the existing “social protection” for killings by middle-class white youths, men over 40, and middle-aged women who killed their husbands, all of whom “were regularly perceived by officialdom as having engaged in behavior alien to their past personality performances and are often excused by reason of insanity or some similar social sinecure of exoneration.” On the other hand, the death of a “slum delinquent gang member” or drunken brawler is viewed differently at every decision point. In such cases, there is an official indictment “for homicides that appear to culminate lives dethroned of propriety and dignity, devoted to destruction of property and person. (We are not here arguing on behalf of the [latter] as also being subjects for social protection, although we would strongly maintain that social determinism needs as much judicial recognition as does psychic determinism. . . .)” In other words, whites get away with murder and should continue to do so, while blacks - both victims and offenders -

contribute nothing to society and deserve its harshest punishments.

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king?](#)
- [Serial killers: Some say they're white, others say black](#)
- [Ways to curtail serial murder: Considering normal human beings who kill](#)
- [Curtailing serial murder: Modus Operandi and calling cards](#)
- [Profiling: An obstacle to curtailing serial murder](#)

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