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Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king? Part 4

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Funeral for the 4 victims of Toulouse France school shootings

Photo by Uriel Sinai/Getty Images

In 1958 Marvin Wolfgang's doctoral dissertation on [Philadelphia homicides](#), using arrest records, was published as a book. Not long afterwards, criminologists' trust in the police and police arrest records would be at an all-time low. In fact, besides Wolfgang, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), was probably the nation's biggest fan of crime reports at that time, particularly since his agency produced the *Uniform Crime Reports*. Hoover never let an opportunity go by without dipping his hands into the numbers and coming up with the conclusion that "crime is up!"

If there is any field of knowledge to which the public is entitled, it is that which pertains to fear-inducing stranger violence, and the reasons for which people lose their liberty and are imprisoned. In the vast vats of numbers, one would think that murder and imprisonment would be fairly close to each other. But the statistics are not even produced by the same agency. It is very difficult to learn what happens to the most infamous murderers; it is hardly any easier to find out what happens to any murderer save those guilt-ridden spouses who kill husbands or wives and wait for the police to come get them. Today, when the solution rate for homicides is 30 percent *less* nationally than the more than 90 percent solution rate in Wolfgang's (1958) day, we do not know who the offender is in almost 40 percent of all murder cases. (**And in some cities**, the

solution rate is no better than 20 percent, see Thomas Hargrove, Scripps Howard News Service, 2010, if you have any problem with this link.)

On top of that, the **Bureau of Justice Statistics (1991)** did a profile of the inmates in the U.S. and in Great Britain and found that, in the U.S. only 1 in 10 prisoners were held for murder. In England and Wales, the figure was 1 in 8. As far as race is concerned, in the U.S., whites were 10 percent, blacks, 11 percent, Asians were 13 percent and “other” were 10 percent. In England and Wales, whites were 8 percent, blacks 4 percent, Asians 15 percent and “other” were 7 percent. Asian? Other? These are not races about which Americans are even told. (Other relevant information includes the following: For 1991, there were 23,760 homicides in the U.S. compared to 689 in England and Wales. The adult population in the U.S. was 187.5 million contrasted to 38.6 million adults in England and Wales. While the number of inmates in the U.S. had increased by 140,000 since 1989, the inmate population in England and Wales was decreasing: from an inmate population of almost 50,000 in 1988 to almost 46,000 in 1991. Both nations were arresting more drug offenders, more property offenders, and more people for “other offenses” than they were for murder or violent offenses.)

One of the major reason for the confusion about who goes to prison and for what reason is the implementation of “career criminal” programs throughout the U.S. And these are a result of “birth cohort” research conducted by Wolfgang *et al* in Philadelphia, reported in **Delinquency in a Birth Cohort (1972)**. In this case, Wolfgang studied the offense records of 10,000 males born in Philadelphia in 1945, (and a second cohort born in 1958.) He reportedly found that a small percentage of this group committed a large percentage of serious offenses. He used official statistics, once again, to determine that most of these serious offenders were lower class blacks. Two sources specifically contradict this finding. In a follow-up study to the original birth cohort, Tracy (1978), using a different method called “self-reports” (surveys), found that official delinquents who were poor and black were not the most frequent or most serious offenders. In fact, the majority of high-incidence offenders had no official record, had never been processed by authorities, or had been repeatedly placed on probation. The official police statistics were also inadequate with older offenders. Adults with the highest incidence of serious crime had never been arrested by the police. After interviewing over 9,000 black and white males of all classes, Tracy concluded that the high profile records of lower-class males were due to selection bias on the part of police and not due to any greater involvement in serious crimes. (This work was published as a doctoral dissertation, *An Analysis of the incidence and seriousness of self-reported delinquency and crime*, and reported in *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, March, 1979. Shortly thereafter, Tracy began to work with Wolfgang on birth cohort studies. But findings are findings.)

A second self-report study, conducted by **Rand (Peterson, Braiker & Polich, 1980, p. xiii) Doing Crime, A Survey of California Prison Inmates**, also found that the most serious and frequent offenders were the least likely to have had prior prison terms or a record, that is, that they were not represented in the official records. The authors found blacks and Mexican-Americans more likely to be arrested than whites, but blacks less likely than Mexican-Americans or whites to have committed serious, violent or property crimes. Whites were responsible for the vast majority of high-incidence offenses. They committed more violence, property and drug offenses than blacks but only slightly more than Mexican-Americans. As this was a test of incapacitation (I.E., incarceration of repeat offenders as a form of crime control) also called “three strikes,” the California Legislature was told early on that the policy would result in the over-representation of poor blacks. The Rand authors stated that “The majority of prisoners do not pose any threat to society. . . Such errors in judgment will result in unnecessarily harsh sentences for marginal offenders and will also result in inefficient use of scarce

and costly criminal justice resources.” Career criminals are actually low-frequency petty offenders. Surprisingly, the Rand study, in book form, can be downloaded via the Internet; it is highly recommended. (If the above link does not work, try <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2005/R2200.pdf>.)

For readers who expected this article to contain the history of American violence, we can only say, please have patience, we will get there.

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- [Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king? Part 2](#)
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