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Racial Threat Theory: A Test of the Economic Threat Hypothesis

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Racial Threat Theory: A Test of the Economic Threat Hypothesis

by

Carl L. Reeds

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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College of Behavioral and Community Sciences
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Abstract

Racial disparities in the criminal justice system are well documented. While one potential contributor to these disparities may be differential offending on the part of racial groups, another alternative or additional explanation is racial discrimination. Blalock developed racial threat theory to explain macro-level discrimination. According to this theory various forms of “threat” posed by minority populations to majority populations leads to more formal social control or disparate formal social control, such as the formal social control that is imposed by the criminal justice system. According to Blalock, “economic threat” occurs when the Black population has large or increasing economic resources that may allow them to compete with the White population for jobs, wages, and housing. Blalock predicts that this increased economic threat will lead to increased disparate formal social control. The theorist further predicts that the relationship will be moderated by the size of the Black population and have a curvilinear shape.

Using data from the US Census, the Census of Jails, and the Uniform Crime Reports for 2,092 counties, the purpose of this study was to identify whether economic racial threat affects disparate formal social control in the manner predicted by Blalock. Results from OLS regression model testing for moderation found that percent Black moderated the relationship between economic threat and disparity but not in the manner predicted by Blalock. Blalock predicted that the relationship between economic threat and formal social control would be strongest when the Black population was small and thus weaker when the Black population was large. The current study found that the larger the Black population, the stronger (not weaker) the relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control. And, while Blalock predicted that the relationship would be positive, the current study found a strong negative relationship.

Results examining the shape of the relationship between economic threat and racial disparities in jail incarceration identified an inverted U-shape consistent with the prediction of Blalock. A discussion of the findings, theoretical implications, and directions for future research are highlighted.

Chapter One

Introduction

Racial disparity in the criminal justice system is well documented. Blacks, in particular, are overrepresented at the various stages of the criminal justice system. They are overrepresented, for instance, as arrestees (Mitchell & Caudy, 2017; Patten, Bond, Low-Weiner, Hood, Lu, Tomascak, & Chauhan, 2019), subjects of use of force (Goff, Lloyd, Geller, Raphael, & Glaser, 2016; Lautenschlager & Omori, 2019), and subjects of stops and searches (Baumgartner, Epp, & Shoub, 2018; Ross, Fazzalano, Barone, & Kalinowski, 2017). Disparities also exist in defense and prosecutorial practice (Kutateladze & Lawson, 2018; Zane, Welsh, & Mears, 2016) and in judicial decision-making including sentencing (Arnold, Dobbie, & Yang, 2018; Crow & Johnson, 2008; Ulmer & Johnson, 2004). With regard to prison populations, although Blacks constitute just 13 percent of the population in the United States, they account for more than 33 percent of the 1.2 million people in prison (Kang-Brown, Schattner-Elmaleh, & Hinds, 2018; Bronson & Carson, 2019)

It is important to discuss the distinctions between racial differences, racial disparities, and racial discrimination at the hands of the criminal justice system. Specifically, there are stark differences in the representation of racial groups in the U.S. population. For instance, according to the 2010 US census, the US population consists of 60% White Non-Hispanics, 19% Hispanics, 13% Blacks, 6% Asians, and 2% other. These are “racial differences.” In the criminal justice system, when we find, for instance, that a certain racial group is disproportionately represented among arrestees relative to their representation in the population, we have “racial disparities.” “Racial discrimination” is linked to the explanations for racial disparities. For

instance, differential offending is a potential contributor to, or explanation for, racial disparities in the criminal justice system (Hipp, 2011; Loeber, Farrington, Hipwell, Stepp, Pardini, & Ahonen, 2015; Mears, Cochran, & Lindsey, 2016); another potential contributing factor is bias and prejudice (Correll, Hudson, Guillermo, & Ma, 2014; Morrow, White, & Fradella, 2017). If bias and prejudice contribute to disparities in the criminal justice system, this represents “racial discrimination.

In this vein, one theoretical approach is reflected in the "racial threat" hypothesis first introduced by Blalock (1967) to explain macro-level discrimination. Racial threat theory predicts that various forms of “threat” posed by minority populations to majority populations leads to more formal social control (FSC) and/or disparate formal social control (D/FSC). Thus, for instance, many studies have examined how large or increasing representations of racial minorities in populations may produce perceptions of threat on the part of Whites. The racial threat hypothesis predicts that, because of these perceptions of threat, Whites will increase social control or increase disparate social control. They can increase social control using various systems, including importantly, the criminal justice system.

Blalock identified three types of racial threat—symbolic threat, political threat, and economic threat. Economic threat, which is the subject of this study, occurs when the Black population has large or increasing economic resources that may allow them to compete with the White population for jobs, wages, and housing (Dollar, 2014).

Blalock predicted the shapes of the relationships for all three forms of threat. Blalock, (1967) proposed the relationship between economic threat and social control to be curvilinear (inverted U shape.) Discrimination is expected to increase as minorities grow in numbers, and the slope is expected to taper off as the minority population become substantial. As minorities

begin to obtain jobs in large numbers, they are viewed as threatening to the majorities, and social control increases. However, as social control starts to increase, other economic exclusionary methods will be used in society, such as workplace discrimination. These economic exclusionary methods will gradually replace social control as social mechanism to cope with racial economic threat. Therefore, according to Blalock, economic threat will have a decelerating impact on social control as threat increases. Blalock not only predicted a curvilinear relationship, but he argued that this relationship would be moderated by the size of the minority population. He predicts that the larger the Black population the weaker will be the relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control.

Research examining economic threat has produced mixed results. D'Alessio, Eitle, and Stolzenberg (2005) examining private police found economic inequality resulted in more police, rather than serious crime. Stults and Baumer (2007) also found a significant relationship between perceived economic threat and police size. In contrast, Parks, Stults, and Rice (2005) found no relationship between economic threat (racial inequality) and arrest rates of Blacks and Whites. In an earlier study, Eitle and colleagues (2002) failed to find a relationship between economic threat (operationalized as White-to-Black unemployment) and Black-to-White arrest rates.

There are potential explanations for the inconclusive results from studies testing economic threat theory. This study remedies some of the weaknesses of the current body of research by using more current data and with a large geographic spread. Further, and importantly, this study is the first of its kind, to test both the (a) curvilinear relationship, and (b) moderating aspects of racial economic threat. Economic threat theory needs research that utilizes more recent data, examines percent Black across multiple states and jurisdictions, and assesses economic threat between Blacks and White. To fulfill this need, the current study seeks to

answer the following question: Does economic racial threat impact disparate formal social control in the manner predicted by Blalock?

Chapter Two presents the literature as it relates to racial threat theory. Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this study. Chapter Four presents the results of the study. Chapter Five provides a conclusion and discussing study limitations, theoretical and policy implications, and future research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter will describe racial threat theory as developed by Hubert Blalock (1967) and provide an overview of the empirical support for the theory. Three types of racial threat will be identified with a particular emphasis on economic threat including Blalock's curvilinear prediction, the subject of this thesis. The working hypotheses for this study developed from the literature below will be introduced.

Racial Threat Theory

As above, racial disparities in the criminal justice system are well documented and various explanations have been offered. Blalock (1967) developed racial threat theory to explain discrimination on a macro-level scale. The key proposition of this theory is that various forms of "threat" posed by minority populations to majority populations lead to more formal social control (FSC) and/or disparate formal social control (D/FSC). Blalock (1967) hypothesized that the White majority would be threatened by a large or increasing Black minority population. Whites would respond with racial discrimination, he predicted, but the type of discriminatory response could vary depending, for instance, on whether the threat was to their economic well-being or political power. Racial threat theory posits three potential threats—symbolic threat, political threat and economic threat.

Racial threat theory sets forth one explanation for how and why resources are allocated to law enforcement and other governmental agencies. The racial threat theory contrasts with that of public choice theory (Greenberg, Kessler, & Loftin, 1985; Chamlin, 1989). Rational public choice theory maintains that the majority controls how the community resources are allocated to

governmental agencies (Chamlin, 1990) and does so on the basis of *objective* threats, such as crime rates. Thus, for instance, public choice theory maintains that resources allocated to crime control efforts are directly linked to the threat of crime (Nalla, Lynch, & Leiber, 1997). In contrast, conflict approaches maintain that the allocation of resources is based on *subjective* threats, such as the subjective symbolic, political, or economic threats posed by minority populations. According to this theory, increases in resources focused on social control are tied to the efforts of those in power attempting to control the less powerful (Nalla, Lynch, & Leiber, 1997; Turk, 1969).

Racial threat theory lies under the umbrella of the conflict criminology theoretical perspective, which holds that laws are designed by the powerful to maintain power. Conflict theory was developed by Karl Marx; he argued that society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. According to conflict theory, social order is maintained by dominance and force of the powerful, rather than by agreement and conformity. According to conflict theory, individuals who are affluent or otherwise powerful try to hold on to their power and wealth by various means designed to repress people who are poor and otherwise without power. A basic premise of conflict theory is that individuals and groups within society try to maximize their own wealth and power. Overall conflict theory focuses on the competition between groups within society—mainly on how social and economic institutions are used as tools to maintain inequality and dominance for the ruling class.

As illustrated above, conflict theory posits the powerful create laws to maintain their dominance in society. Racial threat theory maintains that the threat posed by minorities to the majority leads to discrimination, such as in the form of formal social control and/or disparate formal social control. Formal social control can take the form of external sanctions based on laws

that are enforced by authorized agents including employers, military officers, school systems or teachers, and others. Importantly, formal social control can be imposed through the criminal justice system. There are several ways that the criminal justice system can produce formal social control. For example, research has looked at various empirical measures such as increased law enforcement presence and/or more arrests, prosecutions, and sentences to incarceration.

As described above, formal social control pertains to the *volume* of control that might be imposed when the majority population perceives threat. Some theorists and researchers look instead at the *disparity* in formal social control. These individuals argue that perceptions of threat do not increase social control over the broad population, but instead the social control is directed specifically to the population producing the threat (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities).

Empirical Support for Racial Threat Theory

There has been a considerable amount of research testing racial threat theory. This research—testing the relationship between minority threat and formal social control—has typically measured racial threat as “percent Black” or “percent minorities.” Formal social control has typically been measured in terms of volume of (or disparities in) criminal justice actions or in terms of punitive attitudes. Previous research has found support for racial threat theory within both categories, although there have been contrary findings as well, as reported below.

Impact of Racial Threat on Criminal Justice Actions

Research examining the impact of racial threat on the volume (or disparities in) criminal justice actions has looked at various aspects of the criminal justice system. Much of this research has focused on outcomes linked to the policing component of the criminal justice system, although significant research has also tested racial theory with sentencing outcomes. Research has also tested how racial threat impacts on outcomes outside of, but related to,

criminal justice including, disciplinary responses in schools (Welch & Payne, 2010; Hughes, Warren, Stewart, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Mears, 2017).

As above, the bulk of previous literature examining racial threat theory within the realm of criminal justice has focused on policing outcomes. For example, research has examined the impact of racial threat on police force size and police expenditures (Jackson & Carroll, 1981; Liska, Lawrence, & Benson, 1981; Kent & Jacobs, 2005; Kent & Jacobs, 2004), stop and frisk (Levchak, 2017), arrests (Parker, Stults, & Rice, 2005; Ousey & Lee, 2008; Eitle & Monahan, 2009; Stuckey, 2012; Kane, Gustafson, & Bruell, 2013), and use of force (Smith & Holmes, 2003; Hehman, Flake, & Calanchini, 2018). A number of studies have tested racial threat theory by examining the relationship between the size of the minority population in a jurisdiction and “police strength,” measured in terms of the number of police personnel. As an example, Kent and Jacobs (2005) tested this relationship longitudinally (for the years 1980 through 2000) using data for large U.S. cities. The authors utilized standard measures for concepts; they used percent African American as their independent variable and the number of sworn police officers per 100,000 population as their dependent variable. They found a relationship between the size of minority populations and heightened police presence in cities. (See also Kent and Jacobs, 2004.) Using these longitudinal data, the authors found that the relationship between percentage of African Americans and the per capita number of police officers has become stronger in the last two census years. The implication is that the growth in mean department strength in these large cities since 1980 is due to a greater threat posed by racial minorities.

While the research of Kent and Jacobs (2004, 2005) focused on the strength of police as an outcome, other scholars have tested racial threat theory focusing on other police outcomes, such as police stops, arrests, and use of force. For instance, Levchak (2017) examined New

York's Police Department usage of stop-and-frisk on 587,479 police stops in 2010. The research produced multilevel models that showed the percent of Blacks and Latinos in a precinct increased the volume of stop and frisks in the area. Hence, the amount of crime is not the leading cause of stop-and-frisk as should be the case, but rather the precinct-level residential racial composition is the key driver. In all, this study illustrates that the size of a minority population in an area impacts volume/disparity in stops.

Research examining racial threat in criminal justice practices has also focused on court outcomes, particularly sentencing decisions—such as sentences to prison, sentence length, and so forth (Chen, 2014; Ulmer & Johnson, 2004; Heimer, Johnson, Lang, Rengifo, & Stemen, 2012). Wang and Mears (2010b), for instance, used data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics State Court Processing Statistics program and other sources to test the direct and interactive effects of changes in racial and ethnic threat on prison sentences. The authors' results indicate that increased racial threat (as measured by percent Black) contributes to a greater probability of receiving a prison sentence. In a later study, Feldmeyer, Warren, Siennick, and Neptune (2015) studied the effects of racial, ethnic, and immigrant threat on Florida criminal sentencing using data from the Florida Department of Corrections Guideline database for the years 2000 to 2006 and found similar results. Consistent with racial threat theory, Feldmeyer and colleagues found that growing Black populations corresponded with Black defendants being more likely to receive prison sentences.

Also, with a focus on sentencing, Heimer, Johnson, Lang, Rengifo, and Stemen (2012) analyzed female imprisonment rates in the context of racial threat theory using data from all 50 states for the period 1981 to 2003. This period provides essential data because, during this time, there was a boom in the prison population in the United States. With states as their unit of

analysis, Heimer and colleagues assessed the impact of Black representation in the population on imprisonment rates as their outcome of interest. Consistent with racial threat theory, the authors confirmed Black female's imprisonment rates increased with the concentration of Blacks in metropolitan areas.

Some scholars have tested racial threat with outcomes outside of, but relevant to, involvement with the criminal justice system. School disciplinary practices are widely associated with pathways to involvement with the criminal justice system, particularly involving the punishment of Black males. Payne and Welch (2010) explore how the racial composition of schools impacts on the use of expulsion and suspension. Their results were consistent with racial threat theory. In a later study, Hughes, Warren, Stewart, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Mears (2017) studied the impact of school racial composition on out-of-school suspensions of Black students. This study, too, confirmed that schools with a large or increasing minority population tend to implement greater punitive responses and are less likely to respond in a restorative manner.

Types of Racial Threat

Blalock identified three types of racial threat—symbolic threat, political threat, and economic threat. There are two ways you can describe a symbolic threat. In one version, symbolic threat occurs when Whites, regardless of high class or low class, view non-Whites as criminals or otherwise as capable of committing “deviant” behavior (Dollar, 2014). In the second version the threat emanates from the majority group’s concern with cultural differences; in this case, Blacks are perceived as a threat to the Whites’ way of life. Political threat results when the majority population perceives the minority population as large enough to impact voting and thus public policy, which might favor the interests of Blacks over Whites (Eitle, D’Alessio & Stolzenburg, 2002). An Economic Threat, which is the subject of this study, occurs when the

Black population has large or increasing economic resources that may allow them to compete with the White community for jobs, wages, and housing (Dollar, 2014).

Symbolic Threat

The symbolic threat perspective has received a reasonable amount of support (see King & Wheelock, 2007; Stults & Baumer, 2007; Brown, 2020; Phelps & Pager, 2016; Western, 2006). Some researchers have conceptualized symbolic threat using the standard measure of population composition; that is, they have measured threat in terms of the size of the Black or Latinx population at a single time point or the change of populations over a period of time. Getting closer to the theoretical conceptualization of symbolic threat, some researchers have found indirect support for symbolic threat by illustrating that large or increasing populations of minorities are correlated with racial prejudice, stereotypes and punitive attitudes (King & Wheelock, 2007; Welch, Payne, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2011; Ousey & Unnever, 2012). For example, King and Wheelock, (2007) using data from the Annual Mosaic Survey, illustrated that changes in the racial composition of counties are associated with individual perceptions of Blacks as criminals. The researchers asked respondents whether “African Americans pose a greater threat to public order and safety than other groups, a lesser threat or about the same as other groups?” Their findings reveal the changes in the size of the African American population were correlated with perceptions of Blacks as criminals.

Political Threat

Blalock, (1967) proposes that, if the majority perceive minorities as a threat to political power, it will increase social control of the threatening population to maintain their political dominance. Because political power is directly tied into the ways public resources are allocated, any threat towards taking away the majority’s position of political power is a threat to the quality

and volume of benefits they receive in their communities. Blalock predicted the relationship between political threat and social control would be an accelerating slope (an upward curve). That is, as the political threat of minorities increases, there should be an accelerated level of social control.

Research on this form of threat has operationalized the construct of political threat in various ways. For example, researchers have used the ratio of Black-to-White voting (Eitle, D'Alessio, & Stolzenburg, 2002; Wang & Mears, 2010a; Jordan & Maroun, 2016; Updegrove, Cooper, Orrick, & Piquero, 2020), percentage of voters who voted for a Republican presidential candidate (Keens & Jacobs, 2009), and the extent to which the leadership is Republican (Jacobs & Carmichael, 2001; Stucky, Heimer, & Lang, 2005).

Political threat has received mixed empirical support. For example, Wang and Mears, (2010a), measuring political threat as minority-to-White voting ratio, found it to be associated with more punitive sanctions. The researchers found the threat effect on prison sentences was more pronounced at higher levels of Black political threat, lending support to Blalock's (1967) argument that there should be an accelerating rate effect. Jordan and Maroun, (2016) measured political threat using Black-to-White voting. The researchers reported that, in areas of increased Black population and Black political threat, convicted offenders had a greater likelihood of being sentenced to prison. (See also Britt, 2000; Weidner, Frase, & Schultsz, 2005; in contrast, see Feldmeyer, Warren, Siennick, & Neptune, 2015.) Keen and Jacobs (2009) measured political threat as the percent of citizens who voted Republican. The researchers reported a positive relationship between percent-voting-Republican and the ratio of Black-to-White prison admissions. Similarly, Jacobs and Carmichael, (2001) examined political threats measured as "Republican Strength," operationalized as the presence of a Republic governor and the

percentage of Republicans in state legislatures. Using data from the 50 states largely taken from the 1970's, 80's, and 90's census, the results confirmed that Republican strength led to higher imprisonment rates. Interestingly, further statistical examinations showed the relationship became stronger after the Republicans stressed law and order. (See also Greensberg & West, 2001; in contrast, see Yates & Fording, 2005.)

Not all of the research, however, has provided support for political threat threat. Eitle, D'Alessio, and Stolzenberg, (2002) examined relative voting rates and did not find support for the political threat hypothesis. They examined the ratio of Black-to-White voting in the 1992 and 1994 general elections in South Carolina and found no impact of political threat on the amount of social control experienced by Blacks. Overall, in counties where the researchers compared Black and White voter turnout, they found high Black-to-White voter turnout was not linked to Black arrest rates, even when they controlled for other relevant factors such as violent crime.

Economic Threat

The current study assesses the impact of economic threat on disparate formal social control. Blalock (1967) hypothesized that, as minorities become more competitive with the majority population in terms of jobs and other economic resources, social controls imposed on minorities will increase. These social controls may be those described above, such as through the imposition of criminal sanctions, or be more directly focused on the economic competition, such as through discrimination in the workplace or barriers to employment.

Previous research has operationalized economic threat in several different ways. Economic threat has been measured, for instance, as White-to-Black household mean income. Researchers have used this measure as both a direct test of economic threat, and indirectly as a control variable in studies examining racial threat. Other researchers have operationalized this

construct as income inequality as measured by the Gini index (Jacobs & Kleban, 2003; Jacobs & Carmichael, 2001; Phelps & Pager, 2016), poverty as measured by the percentage of the population living in poverty (Beckett & Western, 2001), and unemployment as measured by the percent of unemployed or unemployment rate (Updegrave Cooper, Orrick, & Piquero, 2020). Additionally, several studies testing economic threat have used race-specific measures (Parker, Stults, & Rice, 2005; Leiber, Peck, & Rodriguez, 2016).

Research has found mixed support for economic threat theory, although most studies provide some support. Stults and Baumer (2007) measured economic threat from Blacks perceived by Whites using a single item from the General Social Survey (GSS) data of 1990. The question asked respondents “to estimate the chances that a White person will not get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified Black person gets one.” The authors found Whites’ perceived economic threat to be significantly associated with police force size.

D’Alessio, Eitle, and Stolzenberg, (2005) measured economic threat as “economic inequality” and examined the impact of serious crime, racial threat, and economic inequality on private police size. The authors found support for the idea that racial threat and economic inequality are better predictors of private police size than serious crime rates. In an earlier study, Jacobs and Helms, (1997) studying public police found similar results. (In contrast see Greenburg, Kessler, & Loftin, 1985.)

Research using race-specific measures has also produced support for the economic threat hypothesis. Leiber, Peck, and Rodriguez, (2016) measured economic threat as *White-to-Black unemployment ratio* and examined its impact on juvenile court outcomes. The authors found that the economic threat of Blacks explained the volume of intake and adjudicatory court outcomes. Jackson and Carroll (1981) measured economic threat as Black-to-White median income and

examined its relationship to police expenditures. The researchers found a negative relationship—supporting the argument that more resources are spent in areas with larger economic gaps between races. In other words, the researchers found that the White response to Blacks is influenced by racial differences in economic status; when economic differentials are especially large, Whites see Blacks as more threatening.

Research using race-specific measures has also produced results that do not support the economic threat hypothesis. Parker, Stults, and Rice, (2005) examined economic threat as a three-ratio measure of racial inequality: ratio of White-to-Black with a bachelor's degree, ratio of White-to-Black with a high school diploma, and the ratio of White-to-Black unemployment rate. The findings indicate racial inequality does not significantly affect either Black or White arrest rates. In an earlier study, Eitle, D'Alessio, and Stolzenburg, (2002) measured economic threat as *log of the White-to-Black unemployment ratio* and failed to find a relationship with Black-to-White arrest ratio.

Curvilinear Relationship

Blalock predicts various shapes of the relationship between threat and formal social control for the types of threat. He is less explicit about the shape of the relationship for symbolic threat than he is for political and economic threat. As previewed above, Blalock predicted the relationship between political threat and social control as increasing with an accelerating slope (an upward curve). Social control is expected to be at its lowest in areas with little minority political threat (Wang & Mears, 2010a), but as the political threat of minorities increases, there should be an accelerated level of social control. According to Blalock (1967), when the threat gets higher, Whites increase their discrimination against the threatening group. Horowitz (1985)

expanded Blalock's prediction, he posits that, as Blacks reached parity in the population, they would be able to mobilize resources to thwart the social control being imposed by Whites.

Blalock proposed that relationship between economic threat and social control would be an inverted "U." Feldmeyer and Cochran (2018, p. 286) describe and explain the various components of the "U" shape:

Blalock's (1967, p.147) economic competition position suggests that 'economic discrimination' toward minority groups increases as their share of the population grows but that the slope of this effect tapers off at higher levels of percent minority (an inverted U shape). When their numbers are small, he suggests that minority groups do not truly compete for economic resources with the majority in any way that would generate threat or a notable response. In contrast, he argues that competition is at its highest when groups are relatively equal in size and are equally competitive for jobs and economic opportunities. Yet Blalock also argues that there is a threshold effect in which further increases in minority composition carry less additional weight for economic threat. For example, he suggests that an increase in percentage Black from 10% to 20% generates greater competition, threat, and discrimination than an increase from 50% to 60% Black, at which point economic discrimination may be near its peak.

The research examining the shape of the curve associated with economic threat has produced three sets of results: a) research that found a Blalock's predicted U-shape curvilinear relationship b) research that found a bell-curved curvilinear relationship c) research that found neither.

Some previous research has found that the shape of the relationship between economic threat and discrimination is an inverted U. As reported above, Stults and Baumer (2007) found support for the economic threat hypothesis. As part of this research, they tested the shape of the relationship between Whites' fear of crime and police force size and found a significant curvilinear relationship associated with formal social control. The authors findings are consistent with Blalock's reasoning that explicit efforts by the majority to maintain economic dominance are likely to occur as Black population grows in relative size, but become less necessary as

Blacks begin to make up a substantial portion of the population. D'Alessio, Eitle, and Stolzenberg's (2005) study confirmed that private police rates increase as economic inequality rises; related to the shape of the relationship, they found that the private police rate peaks at medium levels of economic inequality and then declines thereafter. The authors' finding supports Blalock's prediction that the usage of formal social control tapers off once the Black population becomes substantial enough to compete economically. Jacobs and Helms (1997), too, found an inverted U-shaped relationship between economic inequality and public police size. The researchers found economic inequality led to substantial expansions in the number of police throughout most of the analysis period. (In contrast, see Greenburg, Kessle, & Loftin, 1985.)

Earlier literature *focused largely on police expenditures* also found an inverted U-shaped curvilinear relationship—consistent with Blalock (1967). Jackson and Carroll (1981) examined the relationship between the percentage of Blacks in a city's population and police spending. Their data came from a sample of 90 cities located outside the South. The researchers found a positive relationship between Percent Black and police spending when Blacks were in the minority and a negative relationship when they were in the majority. Similarly, Jackson (1986) study examined if the relationship between the public fiscal commitment to policing and minority group size is the same in small and large cities. The author observed in large cities (50,000+ population) percent Black had a significant impact on the number of resources devoted to policing, and a curvilinear impact on capital policing expenditures, while controlling for other important factors. That is, the findings suggest once Black's make-up a substantial percentage of the population, they utilize their economic and political power to alleviate social control efforts. (See also Greenberg, Kessler, & Loftin, 1985; Liska, Lawrence, & Benson, 1981; Chamlin, 1989).

Previous research has produced findings of the shape of the relationship between economic threat and discrimination as a bell-curved curvilinear relationship. Leiber, Peck, and Rodriguez, (2016) examining the impact of White-to-Black unemployment ratio on juvenile court outcomes found a bell-curved curvilinear relationship. The relationship, however, was not in the form of an inverted U (see also Jacobs & Woods 1999; Olzak, 1992). Therefore, their study did not produce findings consistent with Blalock's prediction.

Research also produced findings with no support for either the curvilinear or U shape. As stated above, Jordan and Maroun (2016) found a relationship between economic threat and prison length. The authors did not, however, find a curvilinear relationship between economic threat and prison length. The authors' data *only* included 40 of the 75 largest counties in the United States, consequently, they did not include counties with high threat. A possible explanation for the authors not finding a relationship is the exclusion of counties where the "threat" reached a high enough level to start tampering off.

Moderating Impact of Population Makeup

Blalock (1967) not only predicted a curvilinear relationship, but he argued that this relationship would be moderated by percent Black in the population. Examining the relationship between economic threat and disparate formal social control, discrimination on the part of Whites is expected to decrease with the size of the minority population. Specifically, Blalock predicts "a positive relationship with a decreasing slope" (Blalock 1967, p. 148). He explains (Blalock 1967, p. 148 – 149) as follows:

As the minority percentage increases, the total amount of intergroup competition should also increase, but in terms of averages the individual minority member should become less of a competitive threat... Put another way, a given increase in the minority

percentage should produce a smaller increment in intergroup competition in situations where there is already a high degree of discrimination, i.e., where the minority percentage is already high. For example, an increase of 10 per cent (Black) should produce a greater increase in degree of competition when this involves a change in the percent (Black) from say, 10 to 20 percent than would be the case with a change from 50 to 60 per cent.

Previous literature has tested a different relationship: whether *perceived threat* moderates the relationship between racial/ethnic context and social control outcomes. Although this literature is limited, it consistently produced evidence that economic threat moderates the effects of ethnic population change on punitiveness towards minorities. However, to my knowledge, no other research has tested the moderating impact of the size of the Black population in a jurisdiction on the relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control.

Current Study

Racial threat theory highlights structural racism and explains how racial groups with power (i.e., White Americans) are able to employ forms of disparate formal social control in response to the threat by other racial groups, such as Black Americans. Studies have tested racial threat theory based on the various threats—symbolic, political and economic. There is considerable support for the economic threat hypothesis, the focus of this study, although there are contrary results as well. Similarly, the results are mixed for the shape of the relationship between economic threat and formal social control (or disparate formal social control).

This study remedies some of the weaknesses of the current body of research. First of all, much of the research is dated. For instance, Jacobs and Helms, (1997) use data spanning 1952 to 1991. D'Alessio, Eitle, & Stolzenberg (2005) utilized data from the 1999 Uniform Crime

Reports and the 2000 decennial Census, Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics, and National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates. The most recent study was completed in 2016 and used data from 1998 through 2007 (Leiber, Peck, & Rodriguez, 2016). This study examines the economic threat hypothesis using more current data and with a large geographic spread. Further, and importantly, this study is the first of its kind, to test both the (a) curvilinear relationship, and (b) moderating aspects of racial economic threat.

Specifically, the following hypotheses will be examined:

H1: The size of the Black population in a jurisdiction will moderate the relationship between economic racial threat and jail disparities, such that the larger the Black population the weaker will be the positive relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control.

H2: The relationship between economic threat of Blacks (BW income) and racial disparities in jail incarceration will reflect an inverted U-shape.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Data from 2,092 counties were used to evaluate whether population composition and Black economic threat are associated with county incarceration disparities, when other relevant variables are controlled. As detailed below, the data for the independent variable, the dependent variable, and control variables come from the U.S. Census, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), and the Census of Jails (COJ).

Sample

The sampling frame for the current study is U.S. counties with values for the necessary variables. After the completion of the listwise deletion (the exclusion of any record if a single value is missing), the final sample consists of 2,092 counties within 45 states. Counties were excluded if they were missing data, such as missing arrest or incarceration data. Regarding the latter, the jail census information used to create our dependent variable does not include data from Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island, or Vermont, as each of these states uses a combined jail-prison system.

Measures

Dependent Variable: Jail Confinement Disparities

Data on race-specific jail populations was obtained from the Census of Jails—a data collection effort by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Racial disparity amongst the jail populations is used to measure disparate formal social control. The data on the demographics of jail inmates come from all jail detention facilities holding inmates beyond arraignment, a period normally exceeding 72 hours. The jail census includes detainees held past arraignment, regardless of

whether pre-trial or post-conviction, and consequently catches a scope of possibly racially impacted criminal equity measures, including restrictive bail, conviction, the in/out decision, and sentence length. The jail data exclude state prisoners.

There are several reasons why using jail data to measure criminal justice disparities is superior to other measures (such as prison disparities). First of all, using jail data is advantageous because it allows for the assessment of criminal justice discrimination for lower-level offenses where officials have the greatest discretion. Research indicates that discrimination is more likely where discretion is greater (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Hester & Hartman, 2017). Another reason to use jail data instead of prison data for this study is that, once incarcerated individuals reach prison, they are frequently housed in prisons out of the original county of residence or offense, which means county-level social control responses cannot be determined. Finally, jail data are superior because they are linked to the advantage of using counties as the unit of analysis instead of states. Jails are operated at the county level; prisons are operated at the state level. States are more heterogeneous in terms of population makeup; counties are much more homogenous. It is more appropriate to use counties than states because of the more homogenous nature of a county compared to a state—avoiding heterogenous bias.

The race-specific confinement rates are created by dividing the quantity of countywide Black incarcerated individuals by the number of countywide Black residents, and similarly the number of White incarcerated individuals divided by the number of White residents. This information is used to create the dependent variable, which reflects the Black-to-White ratio of confinement rates, log-transformed to account for substantial right-skew.

Previous racial threat theory is unclear on whether the formal social control that is produced by threat would be focused on the population generally or on the population that is

producing threat (Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018; Zane, 2018). There is more empirical support for racial threat theory when the dependent measure is disparate formal social instead of formal social control (e.g., see Eitle et al., 2002; Mears et al., 2016; Ousey & Lee, 2008; Parker et al., 2005; Stolzenberg et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2008). As a result, the dependent measure in this study looks at disparate formal social control and not formal social control imposed on the general population.

Independent Variable: Black-to-White Median Household Income

The measure of Black economic threat reflects the ratio between Black resident median income and the White resident median income for each county. The association between the dependent variable and the log of the economic threat measure was also examined since this transformation captures more closely the essence of economic competition as articulated originally by Blalock (1967). If the economic threat hypothesis has any merit, the coefficient for the ratio of Black-to-White median household income should be positive and statistically significant.

Moderating Variable: Percent Black

The moderating variable percent Black is measured as the percentage of Blacks in the county's population based on the 2010 Census (Eitle, D'Alessio, & Stolzenberg, 2014). Percent Black also serves as a control for the other types of threat. Previous research has used percent Black to represent all the different ways racial threat could manifest—including symbolic, political, and economic threat. In the current study, therefore, because the data do not include independent measures of symbolic or political threat, Percent Black serves as a proxy measure (and therefore, controls) for the other forms of threat allowing for the identification of the unique impact of racial economic threat.

Control Variables

Gini Index (100)

The Gini Index is a measure of the income inequality in a county. It is measured on a scale between 0 and 1, where 0 represents perfect equality and 1 represents perfect inequality. Previous studies have measured economic threat using the Gini Index (Liska & Chamlin, 1984; Liska, Chamlin & Reed 1985; Chamlin, 1989), but this measure alone fails to account for racial differences.

Index crime rate

The three measures of crime come from the UCR. The Index crime rate includes eight crimes that the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) combines together to produce an annual crime index. The offenses include willful homicide, forcible rape, robbery, burglary, aggravated assault, larceny over \$50, motor vehicle theft, and arson.

Violent crime rate

Violent crimes are defined in the UCR program as those offenses that involve force or threat of force. Violent crime is composed of four offenses: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

Property crime rate

According to the FBI's UCR program, property crime includes the offenses of burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.

South

This variable measures whether a County is located in a southern state or not.

Analytic Strategy

The analyses used to test Blalock's economic threat proposition proceeded in four stages. In the first stage, descriptive statistics were produced to describe the variables and two histograms were created of Black-to-White ratio confinement rates—one using the raw data and the other using log-transformed numbers to account for substantial right-skewness.

In the second stage, an OLS regression model was calculated to evaluate whether population composition and Black economic threat are associated with county incarceration disparities when other relevant variables are controlled for in the model. In the third stage, the models include an interaction between percent Black populations and Black economic threat, which tests for variations in the effect of Black economic threat across different racial compositions. Finally, a fourth OLS regression model tests for a curvilinear relationship using a quadratic term of Black economic threat.

Chapter Four

Results

This chapter discusses the results of the analysis to answer the main research question of this study. The descriptive statistics are discussed first, followed by the presentations of the results of the OLS Regression models that test the two hypotheses.

Descriptive Statistics

The basic descriptive level statistics were produced to gain a better understanding of the analytic sample. Table 1 provides the mean, median, and standard deviation for the independent variables, control variables, and dependent variable.¹

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Black over White Jail Rate	2,092	7.69	28.52	0.012	1073.6
Ln Black over White Jail Rate	2,092	1.42	0.96	-4.462	6.979
Black over White Median Income	2,092	0.69	0.34	0.078	3.856
Percent Black (15 to 64)	2,092	13.14	16.25	0.225	87.015
Gini Index	2,092	2527.60	1297.21	0.000	8450.3
Property Crime Rate	2,092	43.63	3.49	32.600	64.500
County is in a Southern state	2,092	0.57	0.49	0.000	1.000

On average counties have a Black jail incarceration rate 7.69 times greater than the White incarceration rates, with a standard deviation of 28.52, and ranging from a low of 0.012 to a high of 1,073.6. In contrast, the natural logarithm of Black-to-White jail incarceration rate mean is 1.42 and the standard deviation is 0.96. The natural log is a common function used by researchers to adjust variables that tend to have a substantial skewed distribution. In short, the

¹ Black-to-White jail Rate and Black-over-White jail rate are used interchangeably.

function contracts the original variable making its distribution much more normal by pulling extreme values closer to the mean. Turning to the key theoretical variables, we see that the Black-to-White median household income has an average of 0.69, which ranges between a low of 0.08 and a high of 3.86.

Figure 1 displays a histogram of the Black-over-White Jail Rate in the original scale. The findings of this figure were a skewed right distribution (also known as a “positively skewed” distribution).

Figure 1 – Histogram of the Black-over-White Jail Rate in the Original Scale

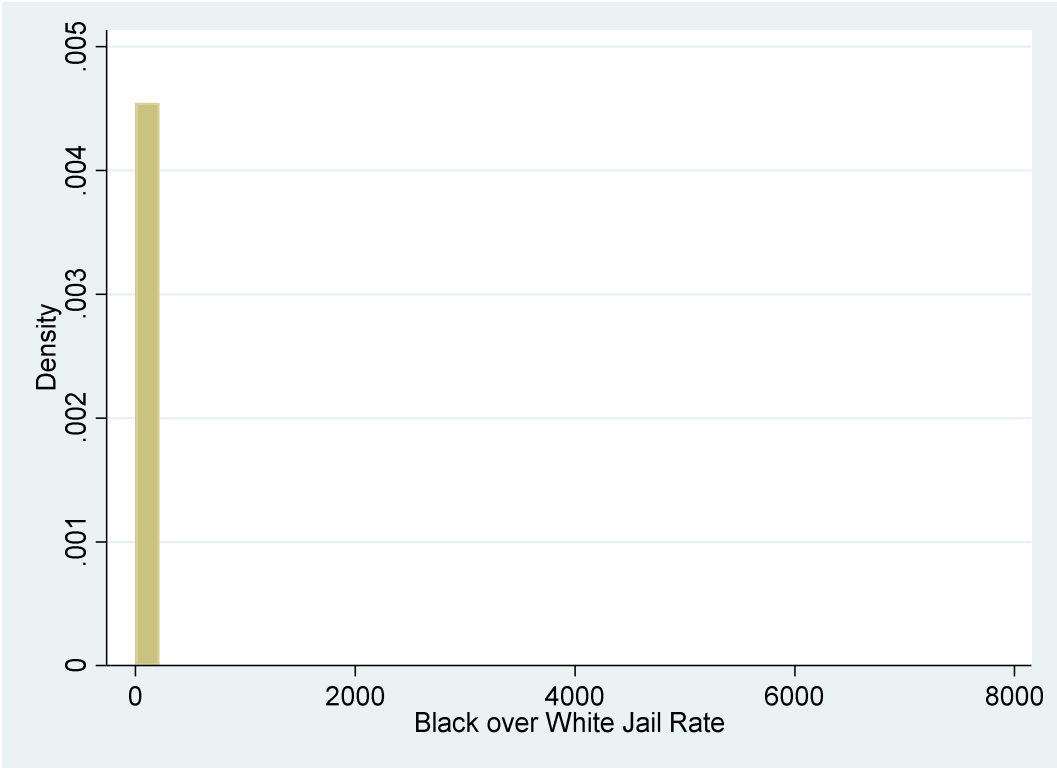


Figure 2 displays a histogram of the Black-to-White Jail Rate in the logarithmic scale. By making the distribution normal, the mean, median, and mode are closer to the center of the histogram. A normally distributed variable is more appropriate for OLS regression models and for the present analysis for multiple reasons (Alisson, 1999). First, it makes assumptions underlying OLS regression more tenable for the present models. Second, it ensures that estimates

are not excessively influenced by extreme counties, and thus are more reflective of an average association across the analytic sample.

Figure 2 – Histogram of the Black-over-White Jail Rate in the Logarithmic Scale

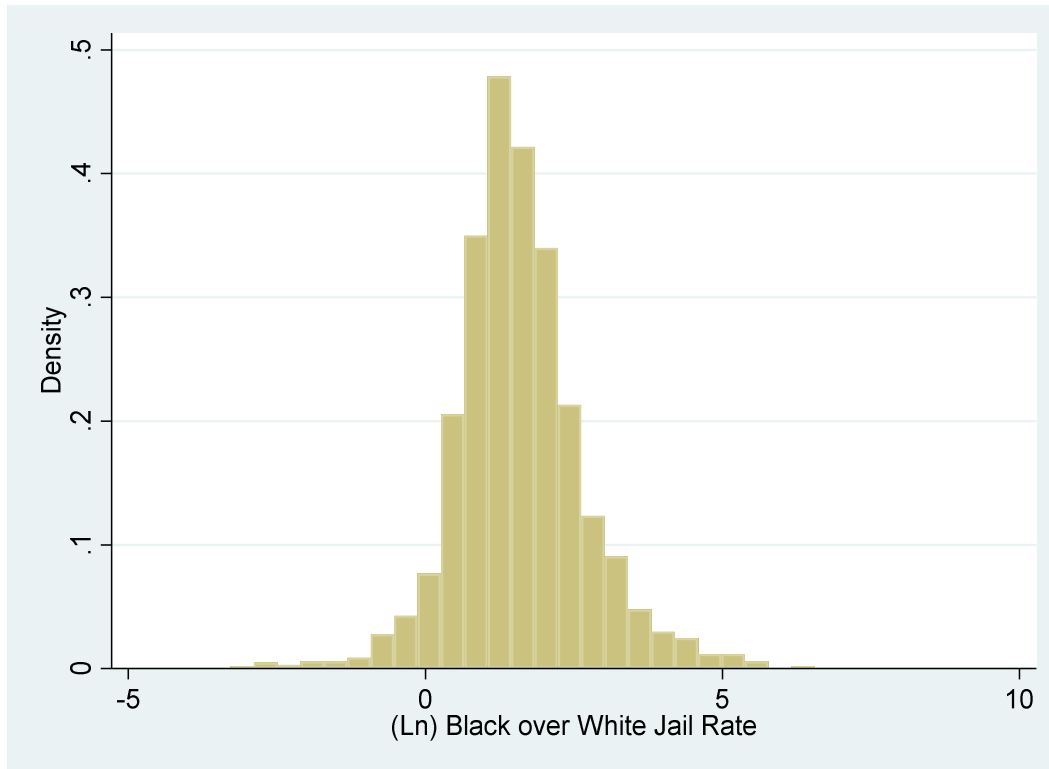


Table 2 presents the OLS regression model predicting the (Ln) Black-to-White jail rate. Model 1 shows that the Black-to-White median household income has a positive bivariate association with Black-to-White jail rate ($\beta = 0.172$, $p < 0.01$), though the variable is only able to account for 0.4% of the total variation in the dependent variable ($R\text{-squared} = 0.004$). Model 2 depicts that Percent Black has a negative bivariate association with Black-to-White jail incarceration rate ($\beta = -0.0182$, $p < 0.01$), and that this variable accounts for 9.5% of the total variation in the dependent variable ($R\text{-squared} = 0.095$). Model 3 shows that once percent Black and Black-to-White income ratio are included simultaneously in the model, the association between BW income and BW jail disappears ($\beta = -0.0300$, $p > 0.10$), though the coefficient for percent Black remains significant, and with the same magnitude ($\beta = -0.0184$, $p < 0.01$). This

result suggests that the initial bivariate coefficient of BW Income is possibly attributable to percent Black, perhaps through a moderation. Model 4 includes the interaction term between Black-to-White median household income and percent Black. In that model, the main effects of both variables are small and non-significant, indicating that BW Income has no association with BW jail rates when the percent of the Black population is very low. However, the negative and significant value of the interaction term ($\beta = -0.0382$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that as percent Black increases, the total effect between BW Income and BW jail rates becomes gradually more negative. In other words, the higher the percent Black the more negative is the total effect of Black-to-White median household income. After the inclusion of the control variables in Model 5 the interaction term remains negative and significant ($\beta = -0.0374$, $p < 0.01$), and the main effect for BW income is still small and non-significant ($\beta = 0.0397$, $p > 0.10$). In contrast, the percent Black has a positive association with BW jail rate ($\beta = 0.0087$, $p < 0.10$). All the control variables, namely the Gini index ($\beta = 0.0166$, $p < 0.05$), the property crime rate ($\beta = -5.2^{-5}$, $p < 0.01$), and the indicator for a county in a Southern state ($\beta = -0.300$, $p < 0.01$) have a negative and significant association with the dependent variable.

Table 2 – OLS Regression Model on the (Ln) Black-over-White Jail Rate with Interaction Terms

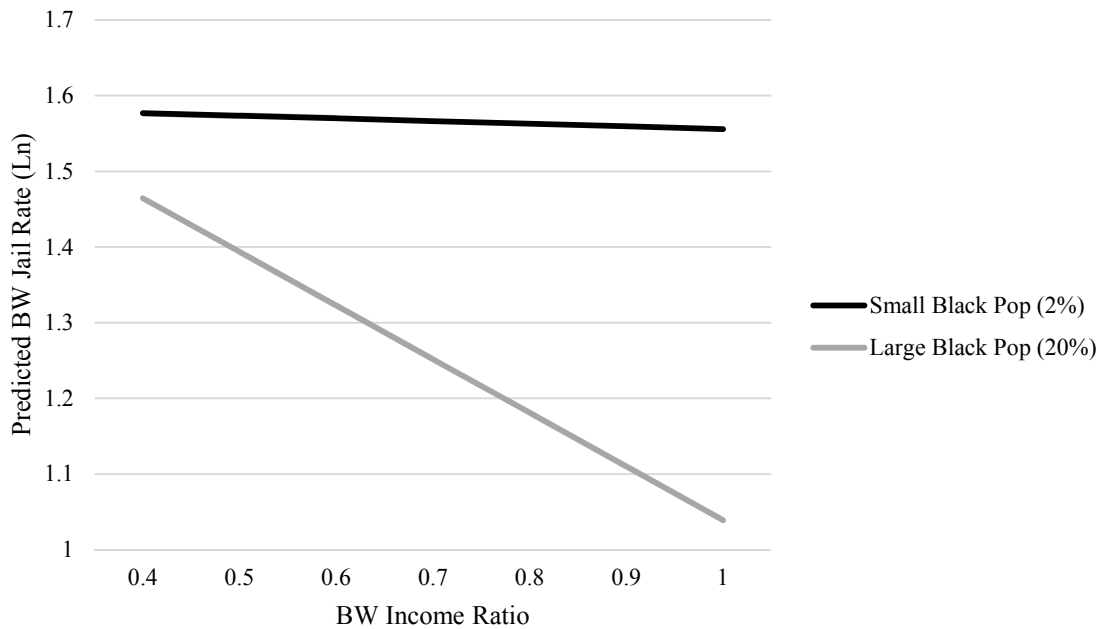
VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
BW median household income (BW Income)	0.172*** (0.0614)		-0.0300 (0.0602)	0.0926 (0.0653)	0.0397 (0.0648)
Percent Black		-0.0182*** (0.00123)	-0.0184*** (0.00127)	0.00295 (0.00471)	0.00874* (0.00494)
BW income * Percent Black				-0.0382*** (0.00814)	-0.0374*** (0.00840)
Gini Index					-0.0166** (0.00666)
Property Crime Rate					-5.15e-05*** (1.80e-05)
County is in a Southern state					-0.300*** (0.0459)
Constant	1.306*** (0.0473)	1.664*** (0.0257)	1.686*** (0.0521)	1.619*** (0.0538)	2.585*** (0.279)
Observations	2,092	2,092	2,092	2,092	2,092
R-squared	0.004	0.095	0.095	0.104	0.133

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; Standard errors in parentheses

Figure 3 illustrates the interaction estimated in Model 4 of Table 2. The figure depicts the predicted values of Black-over-White jail rate by Black-to-White medium household income and percent Black. Based on the figure, Black-to-White Income Ratio has no association with Black-to-White Jail Rate in counties with a small Black population (2%; approximately the 1st quartile). However, there is a strong negative association between Black-to-White Income Ratio and Black-to-White Jail Rate in counties with a high Black population (20%; approximately the 3rd quartile). The figure shows that the estimated impact of Black-to-White Income Ratio depends

on the proportion of the population who identifies as Black. In addition, Black-to-White Income Ratio has a negative effect only where there is a high proportion of Blacks concentrated in a county. In conclusion, the Black-to-White Jail Rate has the smallest disparity in counties with a large Black population and a high Black-to-White Income Ratio.

Figure 3 – Predicted Values of Black-over-White Jail Rate by Black-over-White Medium Household Income and Percent Black



Note: Percent black is held at approximately its first, and third quartiles. All other variables are held at their means. Predicted values were calculated from Model 5.

Table 3 tests for a curvilinear association between the Black-to-White income ratio and the Black-to-White jail rate. Model 1 shows that BW Income does not have a linear or quadratic bivariate association with jail disparities incarceration. Model 2, however, includes an interaction between the BW Income (linear and quadratic terms), and the Percent Black. Model 3 further shows that those coefficients and interactions remain virtually unchanged with the inclusion of the controls for the Gini index, the property crime rate and the indicator for a southern state.

The significant interaction terms in that model suggest that there is variation in the association between BW Income across levels as percent Black. However, those interaction terms are difficult to interpret directly because they are operationalized as a three-way interaction (between BW Income, BW Income, and Percent Black). In a three-way interaction, the coefficients' magnitude and even the significances are difficult to interpret because even the two-way interactions between each of the components are allowed to vary across levels of a third variable. The present research follows extant research in using a plot with predicted probabilities to visualize the three-way interaction (Baumer & Gustafson, 2007, Weiss, Testa, & Santos, 2020).

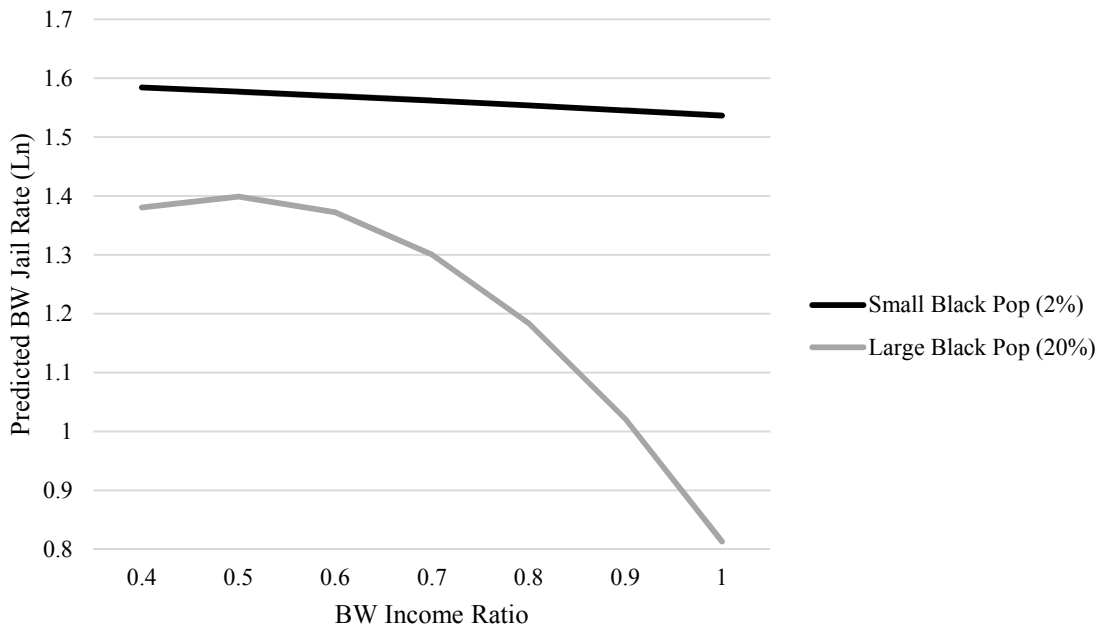
Table 3 – OLS Regression Model on the (Ln) Black-over-White Jail Rate; Quadratic and with Interaction Terms

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
BW median household income (BW Income)	-0.0639 (0.158)	-0.268 (0.168)	-0.312* (0.166)
BW income # BW income	0.101 (0.0625)	0.235*** (0.0686)	0.234*** (0.0675)
Percent Black		-0.0456*** (0.01000)	-0.0421*** (0.0101)
BW Income # Percent Black		0.119*** (0.0299)	0.127*** (0.0298)
BW Income # BW Income # Percent Black		-0.120*** (0.0222)	-0.125*** (0.0220)
Gini Index			-0.0149** (0.00662)
Property Crime Rate			-6.01e-05*** (1.80e-05)
County is in a Southern state			-0.304*** (0.0456)
Constant	1.409*** (0.0793)	1.746*** (0.0868)	2.654*** (0.288)
Observations	2,092	2,092	2,092
R-squared	0.005	0.117	0.146

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; Standard errors in parentheses

Again, a plot of predicted probabilities is used to illustrate the interaction results. In particular, plotted is the influence of Black-to-White income ratio on Black-to-White jail rate at two distinct levels of Black populations (2% and 20%). As depicted in Figure 4, counties with small Black populations that have a high Black-to-White income ratio have higher probabilities of disparate Black-to-White jail rates. The predicted probability of disparate Black-to-White jail rates is lower in settings where a high population of Blacks and a high Black-to-White income ratio exists. These results are consistent with Blalock’s (1967) prediction of a U-shaped inverse relationship.

Figure 4 – Predicted Values of Black over White Jail Rate by Black over White Medium Household Income and Percent Black – Curvilinear Effects



Note: Percent Black is held at approximately its first, and third quartiles. All other variables are held at their means. Predicted values were calculated from Model 5.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

First, this chapter discusses the results in the context of the study's hypotheses. That discussion is followed by the articulation of the theoretical and empirical implications and the implications for policy and practice. Finally, the study limitations are identified, and guidance is provided for future research.

Overview of the Results

The purpose of this study was to assess whether economic racial threat impacts disparate formal social control in the manner predicted by Blalock (1967). Blalock predicted that the relationship between economic threat and disparate formal social control would be moderated by the proportion of the population that was Black and he predicted a U-shaped relationship. This is the only study to date to test both the moderating impact of Percent Black and the shape of the curve. It uses more current data than previous studies and uses data from 2,092 counties from across the US.

The first hypothesis was that economic threat would be positively related to jail disparities, and that this relationship would be moderated by the size of the Black population. The prediction was that the larger the Black population, the weaker would be the relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control. For economic threat, Blalock (1967) predicted a positive relationship with decreasing slope. He projected that, as the percentage of minorities increases, the economic threat to the majority population would increase, but "in terms of averages the individual minority should become less of a competitive threat" as the minority population grows (p. 148).

This study found overall support for racial threat theory and support for percent Black as a moderating variable. The analysis confirmed a moderating impact of percent Black, but in the manner quite different from that predicted by Blalock. Blalock predicted that the positive relationship between economic threat and formal social control would be strongest when the Black population was small and thus weaker when the Black population was large. The results of the current study showed that the larger the Black population, the stronger (not weaker) the relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control. And while Blalock predicted that the relationship would be positive, the current study found a strong *negative* relationship between economic threat and disparity when the percent Black in the county is high versus low.

The second hypothesis was that the relationship between Black economic threat (Black-to-White income) and racial disparities in jail incarceration would reflect an inverted U-shape. Blalock (1967) suggested that discrimination toward minority groups increases as their economic threat grows, but that the slope of this effect tapers off at higher levels of economic threat. Blalock posited that, once Blacks attain substantial economic power, they are able to use their resources to combat the discrimination. These three processes would produce the proposed inverted U-shape, but only a few studies have tested this relationship and found this predicted shape (Stults and Baumer, 2007; D'Alessio, Eitle, & Stolzenberg, 2005).

The results supported the second hypothesis. This study—examining the relationship between economic threat (measured as Black-to-White Income) and racial disparities in jail incarceration—identified an inverted U-shape consistent with the prediction of Blalock. These results suggest that Blacks are likely to face increasing discriminatory practices as their

economic threat rises up to the point that their economic power is on par with Whites; once Blacks achieve higher Black-to-White income, the disparate treatment lessens.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This study testing Blalock's economic threat hypothesis has both theoretical and empirical implications. The finding of a relationship between Black-to-White medium household income and racial disparities in local jail incarceration is consistent with the baseline proposition of racial threat theory, which maintains that the criminal system is a tool used by Whites and other individuals in power to maintain their dominance in society and control the minority populations that poses potential threats. The finding of a relationship between economic threat and disparate formal social control is consistent with other research (Stults & Baumer, 2007; D'Alessio, Eitle, & Stolzenberg, 2005; Leiber, Peck, & Rodriguez, 2016).

The results provide partial support for the other key propositions of the economic threat hypothesis of racial threat theory. First of all, the results of this study provided support for the proposition that the relationship between economic threat and discriminatory formal social control is curvilinear. According to this proposition, Blacks experience the least amount of discrimination when they pose the least threat economically, but discrimination increases as their economic threat grows. Blalock defined economic threat in terms of size of the Black population and suggested that Blacks can expect bias and discrimination to be at its height when their population is of relatively equal in size to the majority and thus are able to compete for economic resources. Racial threat theorists explain the downward-curve findings by suggesting that once Blacks make up a substantial proportion of the population, they are able to thwart the discriminatory practices implemented against them. This study, using actual measures of economic threat (versus Percent Black), produced findings consistent with other research that has

identified a curvilinear relationship (Stults & Baumer, 2007; D'Alessio, Eitle, & Stolzenberg's, 2005). As Blacks obtain *economic power* relative to Whites, disparities in the criminal justice system were reduced. Indeed "economic threat" as operationalized here (and elsewhere in racial threat research) is equivalent to "economic power." So while Blacks may be more threatening, they are also acquiring more power to thwart the discriminatory tendencies of the majority population.

Something else may be happening as well that implicates Blalock's "symbolic threat." One version of symbolic threat is that the majority population links the minority population to criminal threat, and yet we know from extensive criminological research that economic status is a key predictor of involvement in street crime (Piquero, 2015; Quinney, 1964; Bjerck, 2007). The increased economic power of the minority population may correspond with their reduced involvement in street crime, which itself might reduce the overall "threat" experienced by the majority population. This reduced threat could lead to reductions in discriminatory formal social control. This possibility supports the suggestion below that future research explore how the various forms of threat might interact to affect the levels of disparity in the criminal justice system.

Blalock's second proposition pertained to the moderating impact of the size of minority population. The current study provides support for Blalock's proposition that the relationship between economic threat and discriminatory formal social control is moderated by the size of the minority population, but not in the manner predicted by Blalock. There are two aspects of Blalock's proposition, and neither was supported. The first component pertained to the context (as defined by minority representation) in which the relationship between economic threat and discrimination would be the strongest. Blalock predicted it would be strongest when the minority

population was small, and that the relationship would weaken as the minority population got larger. The second aspect of his prediction pertained to the direction of the relationship. He predicted a positive relationship—meaning the greater the economic threat the greater the disparate formal social control. Combining the two components, as percent minority increased, Blalock predicted “a positive relationship but with decreasing slope” (Blalock 1967, p. 148). In contrast to Blalock’s proposition, this study found that the stronger relationship was when the minority population was large; further the strong relationship in that large minority population was negative. As seen in Figure 4 of the results, in counties with small Black populations (2% in that figure), increased economic threat did not affect discrimination. In contrast, in counties with large Black populations (20% in that figure), as economic threat increases, disparity rises somewhat, but then tapers off and discrimination is reduced.

The combined results from testing the two propositions have important theoretical implications. The results of the curvilinear proposition provided evidence that the increasing economic power of Blacks thwarts discrimination. According to the test of the second proposition, however, the increasing economic power of Blacks *only* thwarts discrimination when their numbers are large. The implication is that reductions in discrimination do not come from economic power or large numbers in isolation. Instead, minorities need both economic power and large numbers to “change the curve” of discrimination.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The present study is a confirmation that racial threat produces discriminatory behavior within the criminal justice system. Discriminatory behavior in the criminal justice system—such as discrimination manifested in the incarceration of Blacks as found here—needs to be reduced. Discrimination needs to be addressed in every component of the criminal justice system, including law enforcement, courts and corrections. One intervention receiving increased attention is implicit bias training of criminal justice officials. Implicit bias training can help individuals become aware of their bias and explore how their biases can produce discriminatory behavior, and it can provide individuals with skills for reducing and managing their biases (Fridell, 2017; Fridell & Brown, 2015). This training may need to go beyond criminal justice officials. Racial threat theory has various theoretical ambiguities including how and by whom threat is experienced. Are the criminal justice officials directly experiencing this threat or is the general public experiencing this threat and putting pressure on the officials to discriminate? If, in fact, it is the latter, then the implicit bias training and other prejudice/discrimination-reducing measures need to be implemented more broadly with community members.

The present study may have implications for efforts to promote integration. This study found a relationship between Black economic threat and discriminatory formal social control and found a moderating effect of Percent Black, such that the relationship between economic threat and disparate formal social control is strongest in areas higher populations of Blacks. Two unacceptable policy implications are that society, to reduce discrimination, should (1) reduce the economic power of Blacks, and/or (2) reduce the number of Blacks in areas in order to reduce discrimination. A more acceptable policy direction may pertain to greater integration of Blacks and Whites. Contact theory, out of psychology, posits intergroup contact under appropriate

conditions can effectively reduce prejudice between Blacks and Whites, and thus reduce discrimination (Allport, 1954; Laurence, 2014; Laurence, Schmid, Rae, & Hewstone, 2019). Consistent with this theory, Black and White families living in the same neighborhood (and having positive interactions) could reduce bias and thus discrimination. Indeed, practically speaking, integration efforts are probably best suited at the neighborhood-level, rather than a county-level (which reflects the unit of analysis for this study). It would be misguided to assume that moving more Blacks into a county would potentially solve the discrimination problem as the Blacks and Whites might still be segregated from each other. The integration needs to be at the neighborhood level to increase the likelihood of regular positive interactions.

Legal interventions should be used to identify criminal justice disparities and implement policies to end them. One version of this is the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) “Patterns and Practice” program. Through this program, the DOJ can investigate criminal justice entities (such as police departments, prisons) to identify constitutional violations, of which discrimination is one. There are a few suggestions in which direction should be directed to local police departments. They can and have analyzed data to identify disparities and then, as warranted, entered into consent decrees with provisions directed toward reductions in discriminatory criminal justice actions. The Obama administration relied on consent decrees to hold local police departments accountable. In contrast, during the Trump administration, the DOJ stopped intervening with local departments. President Biden announced that his administration would revitalize this DOJ program (Phillips, 2021). The process will be most effective if used to reform various components of the criminal justice system—not only police departments, which have received the most attention. The DOJ should hold all components of the criminal justice system accountable for discriminatory practices.

Study Limitations and Future Research

While this study makes both theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature by assessing the relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control, there are a number of weaknesses of the current study with implications for future research.

As above, a key contribution of this study is the operationalization of the dependent variable, not just as formal social control, but *disparate formal social control*. The use of this operationalization can be classified as a strength or weakness, depending on whether the scholar views social control as *diffuse* or *targeted*. Several scholars have studied the dependent variable as diffuse—the criminal justice system widening the net for individuals to get incarcerated—regardless of race or ethnicity. For some researchers and theorists, the social control is presumed to be targeted enforcement aimed at the minority group. Additional theoretical clarification and empirical assessments are needed.

This study used disparities in *jail confinement* as the measure of discriminatory formal social control. This narrow conceptualization focuses on just one component of the criminal justice system. Future research should replicate the examination here, but use alternative or additional dependent variables that reflect other components of the criminal justice system (i.e., law enforcement, courts, corrections). This future research might show that the relationships identified within the current study are replicated when examining other decision points within the criminal justice system. Alternatively, it is possible that researchers find that the effects of racial threat impact differently on various criminal justice decision points.

The internal validity of this study could have been enhanced with a stronger measure of economic strength/threat. The current study used Black-to-White median household income to produce the measure of economic threat. Median household income is only one measure of

economic strength and does not fully capture the economic threat that Blacks might pose. Economic threat might additionally or alternatively take the form of, for instance, net worth, and home ownership. Individuals may have a low income but have inherited wealth that could produce threat to the majority population. Future research using enhanced measures of economic power will strengthen our understanding of how economic threat manifests and produces disparate formal social control.

Another weakness in the present study is the imprecise measurement of symbolic and political threat used as controls in an effort to isolate economic threat. Blalock (1967) posited that the different forms of threat operate in different ways, and even proposed different shapes of their relationships with formal social control. Consistent with previous research, the current study used Percent Black as a proxy measure for threat. This study would have been strengthened by incorporating specific, independent measures for each type of threat. This recommendation is consistent with the suggestion of Stults and Baumer (2007, p. 520) that research incorporate more precise operationalizations of the various forms of threat.

More precise measures of symbolic threat should reflect the two ways that symbolic threat has been conceptualized. One form is when Whites feel their cultural/values are threatened by Black individuals. Another form is when Whites view Blacks as criminals. The first form might be measured through survey items tapping into the threat majority populations perceive to their values and culture. The second form might be measured using data from the Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT). The “Weapons IAT” measures the extent to which the respondents link people of color to threat and aggression. Researchers could potentially use these data, aggregated to the county level, as a measure of the second form of symbolic threat.

Researchers have produced various operationalizations of political threat. For instance, political threat has previously been operationalized as proportions of the population that vote Republican versus Democratic, based on the history of Democrats helping marginalized groups. Future research might utilize even more direct measures of political power (and thus “political threat”) by using the percent or number of officials in the geographic area under study who are Black. At the county level, this could include mayors, school board member, and district attorneys. These kinds of measures account for the degree to which members of the Black community have obtained political leadership positions.

Researchers should adopt quality measures of economic, symbolic, and political threat, and conduct studies that examine the impact of all three of these measures on formal social control, building on the single study to date that has included measures of all three threats (Eitle, D’Alessio, & Stolzenberg, 2002). By including all three forms, researchers could identify the varying predictive powers of each form of threat, controlling for the others, and explore (1) the shapes of the relationships for symbolic, political, and economic threat; and (2) the moderating impact of percent Black—using percent Black, percent Black squared, and percent Black cubed. This research with all forms of threat included would also allow researchers to see whether and how the various forms of threat might interact to produce discrimination.

Future research should examine whether the relationship between threat and discriminatory formal social control varies across types of areas, such as rural versus urban and regions of the country. This research could examine, for instance, whether the same racial threat mechanics produce discriminatory formal social control in small rural counties versus large urban cities. Such research could assess whether and how racial threat produces formal social control across regions to determine whether and to what extent the theory is region-specific.

Conclusion

This research found partial support for Blalock's economic threat hypothesis. Consistent with his predictions, economic threat produced disparate formal social control, this relationship reflected a U-shaped curve, and Percent Black moderated the relationship, albeit in a manner different from that predicted by Blalock. This is the first known study to examine both the curvilinear relationship and moderating impact of population makeup when examining the relationship between economic racial threat and disparate formal social control. The present study adds to the empirical literature on racial threat and adds clarity to a theory for which theoretical ambiguities have been identified (Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018).

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