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Where You Live and What You Watch: The Impact of Racial Proximity and Local Television News on Attitudes about Race and Crime

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## **Where You Live and What You Watch: The Impact of Racial Proximity and Local Television News on Attitudes about Race and Crime**

Despite significant social, economic, and political changes over the last one-half century, racial polarization characterizes much of American life. Geographically, whites tend to live in the suburbs and minorities (especially African-Americans) are concentrated in urban centers (Farley and Allen, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993). Although there has been a noticeable increase in rates of black suburbanization since the passage of the Fair Housing Act, the prevailing pattern is for blacks to move to *black* suburbs (Cohen and Dawson, 1993). The net result is that most people's social networks are racially and ethnically homogeneous (Oliver, 1988).

Naturally, the question arises about the effect of racial segregation on public opinion. Traditionally, racial attitudes were thought to vary as a result of inter-personal interactions between the races (Allport, 1954). The extent of integrated friendships, church groups, neighborhood associations, and work environments, therefore, determine public attitudes about race. Two prominent theories have dominated the research literature. Social contact theory argues that under certain conditions, intergroup contact successfully reduces prejudice and increases tolerance (Allport, 1954; Cook, 1985; Forbes, 1997; Pettigrew, 1986; Stephan and Bingham, 1985; Sigelman and Welch, 1993). The beneficial effects of contact in fact dependent on the nature of the contact itself: Positive interactions between individuals who consider themselves equal and mutually non-threatening lead to a decrease in anxiety about outgroups (Desforges et al. 1991; Riordan and Ruggiero, 1980). On the other hand, group threat theories suggest that racial proximity represents *real* threat, which, in turn, increases levels of prejudice (Blumer, 1958; Campbell, 1965; Giles and Evans, 1984; Reider, 1985). Both schools of thought, however, call special attention to the importance of personal influences on racial attitudes.

Public opinion is also thought to be influenced by *impersonal influences* (Mutz, 1993, 1994). In modern society the media are perhaps the most pervasive of these agents. Most Americans are bombarded by a steady stream of mass media information, from a variety of channels. As Mutz and Soss (1997: 452) observe, “mass media coverage of political issues may serve as a surrogate for more direct expressions or solicitations of public opinion. In this way, media attentiveness to political issues may provide mass publics with an accessible, though fallible, means of monitoring their political environment.” Thus, impersonal factors can have a significant effect on public views.

The persistence of racial segregation means that impersonal influences such as the media are likely to play a significant role in the development of racial attitudes. As Sigelman and Welch (1993) point out, “Lacking such firsthand information, whites must base their responses on whatever information they may have at their disposal.” Increasingly, such information is obtained from media reports -- and local television news has now become the dominant source of public affairs information (Hess, 1991; Papper and Gerhard, 1997; Roper-Starch, 1994).

A growing body of research indicates that local news relies heavily on a “crime news script” that casts minority group members -- and African-Americans in particular -- in the featured role of violent perpetrator (Entman, 1990, 1992; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, and Wright, 1996; Romer, Jamieson, and de Coteau 1998; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000). As Entman (1998: 19) notes, “TV news, especially local news, paints a picture of Blacks as violent and threatening toward whites, self-interested and demanding of the body politic -- continually causing or being victimized by problems that seem endless.” Not surprisingly, exposure to this type of coverage leads to negative evaluations of African-Americans and a lack of support for policies that are in their interests (Peffley, Shields, and Williams, 1996). The news media, therefore, play an important role in the dynamics of racial beliefs (Entman, Langford, Burns-Melican, Munoz, Boayue, Groce, Raman, Kenner, and Merrit, 1998).

While researchers have spent a great deal of time examining the main effects of both personal and impersonal influences on racial attitudes, few studies have looked at the interaction between the two. Put differently, it seems unlikely that personal and impersonal factors would act completely independent of one another. Rather, it is more plausible that racial attitudes are the end product of various life experiences, both personal and impersonal.

In this study, we are interested in whether neighborhood context mitigates or exacerbates the effect of exposure to the stereotypic crime news script on attitudes about race and crime. Social contact theory would predict that living in racially integrated, yet relatively safe environment tempers racial resentments and allows white viewers to reject the dominant news paradigm about blacks as criminals. Group threat theory predicts that racial proximity increases whites' acceptance of the crime news script, thereby boosting the negative impact of exposure to stereotypic crime news.

We collected information about neighborhood racial composition for each subject in an experiment of local television news. We then exposed subjects either to a full confirmation of the crime news script (i.e., a black/minority violent crime suspect) or to an incomplete version of the script (i.e., stories about violent crime that included a white suspect or no suspect at all). Our findings generally support the contact hypothesis. We found that, when exposed to the "complete" crime news script, white subjects living in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods expressed more negative stereotypic evaluations of blacks, felt less close to blacks as a group, accepted more punitive explanations for crime, and endorsed more punitive crime policies. Whites from moderately mixed neighborhoods, however, were either left unaffected or moved in the opposite direction: becoming less accepting of negative stereotypes, feeling closer to blacks as a group, accepting less punitive explanations for crime, and endorsing less punitive crime policies.

In short, this paper brings together work on race, residential integration, media effects, and public opinion. In the following section we review the literature on the importance of

personal influences like intergroup proximity to racial attitudes. We move on to discuss the impact of impersonal factors such as local television news. This work informs hypotheses about the interactive effect of racial proximity and media exposure on attitudes about race and the related issue of crime. The next section details the experimental design and describes the measurement of our indicators. The fourth section presents the results. We end the paper with a discussion of the implications of our findings for intergroup relations.

### Personal Influences: Social Contact and Group Threat

An important goal of the Modern Civil Rights Movement was social integration. King's "I have a dream speech" is replete with "melting pot" metaphors. Government action during this period also fully embraced integrationism. Important pieces of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968; Supreme Court rulings like *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) and *Cooper v. Aaron* (1958); and executive orders like #8802 were expected to smooth the path for an integrated society.

The underlying premise of the integrationist's approach represents the simplest formulation of the contact hypothesis – the more contact between the races, the less prejudice; the less prejudice, the more equality (Allport, 1954). More formally, repeated positive interactions between members of different racial groups reduce negative stereotyping. To scholars like Allport and Pettigrew, however, the *nature* of the contact was as important as its *frequency*. Thus, intergroup contact only lessens prejudice under certain conditions (i.e., shared goals, equal status, lack of competition, and authority sanctions; see, Forbes, 1997 and Pettigrew, 1997 for a full discussion). Moreover, racial beliefs are thought to be influenced by the types of contact situations (Cook, 1962, 1978) and how information is processed in various contact situations (Brewer and Miller, 1996; Stephan and Stephan, 1996). A related body of research that more closely matches our present study examines *proximity* as opposed to interaction. On this line of reasoning, living or working closely with members of out-groups increases the *opportunity* for

inter-personal interaction (Jackman and Crane, 1986; Kinder and Mendelberg, 1995; Robinson, 1980; Williams, 1964). As with interpersonal interaction, the opportunity for positive interracial contact is thought to undermine racial stereotypes acquired earlier in life.

While the contact hypothesis has been sustained across a variety of cultures, contact situations, and target groups (see, Pettigrew, 1997), it also has any number of theoretical and empirical shortcomings (see, Forbes, 1997; Witing and Grant-Thompson, 1998). The traditional rejection of contact theory is found in Blumer's seminal work on prejudice. His basic claim is that racial prejudice is not simply a matter of personal feelings but rather a function of group position. Just as the "Columbia school" thought political attitudes were a function of group attachments, so too is racial prejudice. In other words, a sense of "group position" dominates individual sentiments.

White resentments, from this view, are a product of perceived threat. As Kinder and Mendelberg note, "...blacks in the neighborhood threaten property values and safe schools, blacks at church violate definitions of community; blacks at work stir up apprehensions about lost jobs and promotions (1995: 404). Moreover, research on electoral politics suggests that the presence of blacks also heighten fears about the redistribution of public goods and services (Bledsoe, Welch, Sigelman, and Combs, 1995; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990). In other words, whites will increase their negative prejudices about African-Americans as they move closer. To summarize, both the contact and group threat hypotheses posit that racial prejudice is affected by inter-personal contact.

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### Impersonal Influences: The Crime News Script

Crime reporting is a perfect vehicle for news programmers faced with competitive commercial pressures. Crime is easy to find, cheap to produce, and comes complete with gripping visuals and dramatic accounts of personal tragedy and turmoil. It is hardly surprising, then, that regardless of the size of the media market, crime coverage now dominates local news (Klite,

Bardwell, and Salzman, 1997). National opinion data corroborate this trend as a wide majority of Americans report getting their information about crime from local television news (Lee and Ladd, 1997).

Crime news reporting contains two central elements - crime is violent and criminal perpetrators are nonwhite (Entman, 1990, 1992). For instance, Gilliam et al. (1996) found that local news in Los Angeles distorted black crime rates not so much by intentionally targeting black criminals but by focusing on violent crime. In a recent study of local television news in Philadelphia, whites were typically depicted as victims of violent crime and people of color were typically portrayed as the perpetrators of violence (Romer, Jamieson, and de Couteau, 1998). Finally, Entman's well-known study of television news in Chicago found that black suspects were regularly shown in handcuffs and escorted by law enforcement officials. White defendants on the other hand, were more often shown in street-clothes, accompanied by their lawyers.

This paradigm of crime news reporting, according to Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) contributes to a narrative "script" that has taken on the value of common knowledge.<sup>1[1]</sup> In a series of experimental studies they show that exposure to full confirmation of the crime news script (i.e., a violent black perpetrator) leads white viewers to endorse negative stereotypes about African-Americans and support punitive crime policies such as the death penalty and "three strikes" legislation (see also, Peffley et al, 1996). The script is so ingrained, in fact, that about nearly half of the whites who saw no perpetrator at all mistakenly claimed that they had seen a black perpetrator (Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000). In other words, the issue of crime, like other issues such as welfare and drug use, has become "race-coded" (Gilens, 1999; Beckett, 1995; Campbell & Reeves, 1994).<sup>2[2]</sup>

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<sup>1[1]</sup> The theoretical basis for their findings rests on the social psychological concept of "scripts" (see, Schank and Abelson, 1977). The psychological utility of scripts is that they facilitate comprehension by allowing people to make simple and what they believe to be accurate inferences about the actions of others.

<sup>2[2]</sup> Negative depictions of African Americans are also found in film roles (Bogle, 1989; Guerrere, 1993; Ross, 1996) and commercial television programming (Abernathy-Lear, 1994; Armstrong and Neudendorf, 1992; Fiske, 1994; Gray, 1995). The recent outcry over the lack of diversity in the upcoming fall network

In sum, television news - by trading on a formulaic crime news script – infuses the issue of crime with racial significance, simultaneously reinforcing racial stereotypes while it increases support for a punitive crime policy agenda. This effect is consistent across different states, cities, media markets, and time periods.

*The Interaction of Personal and Impersonal Influences on Racial Attitudes*

We now can specify the joint effects of racial proximity and media exposure on attitudes about race and crime. Social contact theory suggests that whites living in close proximity to African-Americans are in a position to *counter-argue* the crime news script. Living in an area with a larger number of blacks provides whites with a wider arsenal of experiences other than the one presented in the typical crime newscast. Powers and Ellison write, “[T]his positive first-hand information may be generalized into positive perception of the group(s) as a whole, thus permitting individuals to counter unfavorable racial and ethnic stereotypes” (1995:206). The expectation is that these individuals will either be unaffected by exposure or will actually soften their racial views and lower their support for punitive approaches to crime. Conversely, racially isolated whites, with no experience to fall back on, are more likely to rely on media messages. For these people, exposure to the crime news script should heighten racial antagonism and support for punitive views on crime. Of course, all these expectations about the effects of contact are based on the premise that whites in mixed neighborhoods will not in fact be directly exposed to higher levels of crime. In that case, contact theory would predict a deterioration of intergroup relations.

Group threat theories maintain that racial prejudice is the by-product of inter-group competition. From this perspective, while proximity brings racial animus close to the surface, exposure to the crime news script (i.e., the violent black perpetrator) further primes racial antagonisms and leads to increased support for social control. For people who are predisposed to

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lineup bears out his point.



dislike minorities, the crime news script simply adds fuel to the fire. To the contrary, a lack of interracial contact allows people the luxury of racial tolerance, free from uncomfortable racial troubles. Thus, we expect exposure to either decrease racial prejudice and punitiveness, or have no impact at all on the beliefs of whites that live in racially homogenous communities.

This discussion can be boiled down to two straightforward and competing hypotheses about the interaction of neighborhood racial context and exposure to the crime script on attitudes about race and crime.

*Hypothesis #1.* Extending the social contact hypothesis, whites living in racially homogenous areas will be more likely to endorse negative stereotypes about blacks and to support punitive crime policies as a result of exposure to the black crime script. Whites living in moderately racially heterogeneous areas will either be left unaffected by or will actively reject the stereotypic portrayal.

*Hypothesis #2.* Extending the group threat hypothesis, exposure to the black crime script among whites living in racially heterogeneous neighborhoods will boost negative stereotypes about blacks and increase support for a punitive crime policy agenda. Whites from racially homogenous neighborhoods will not exhibit these increases.

### The Local News Experiments

We designed the experiments in this study so that the only differences between any two groups of viewers concerned the presence or absence of African-American crime suspects in the news. Since all other properties of the news presentation were identical we can attribute the observed differences between conditions, if any, to the racial cues present in the story.

The present research was designed to overcome some of the shortcomings of the experimental method. First, the experimental setting was located in a shopping mall in a major

city in the western United States, and was constructed to look like a living room complete with couches, houseplants, coffee tables etc. Respondents were offered coffee and cookies during their visit, and were told not to take notes while they watched the news. Second, the convenience sample was drawn from adults in the metropolitan area, and was roughly comparable to the area's population in terms of gender, education, income, and partisanship. Lastly, the news stories used in these experiments were drawn directly from local news broadcasts and were minimally edited to produce the desired stimuli. The total available sample size used in these analyses is 390 whites.<sup>3[3]</sup>

Participants were told that the objective of the study was “selective perception” of news reports. They were given instructions and asked to complete a short pre-test questionnaire (e.g., social background, party identification and political ideology, level of interest in political affairs, media habits). They then watched the videotaped newscasts. At the end of the videotape, participants completed a lengthy questionnaire that included questions about their political, social and racial beliefs. After completing the questionnaire, subjects were debriefed in full and paid the sum of fifteen dollars.

Respondents were randomly assigned to conditions in the experiment. Each respondent viewed a 12-minute selection of news. One of the stories shown in the middle of the news segment was the treatment story, while the remaining stories were held constant across groups and did not contain any reference to crime. Using this basic design we conducted two separate studies from June through December 1997. The first study manipulated both the race of the perpetrator (African-American, white, or no suspect)<sup>4[4]</sup> and the type of crime (violent or

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<sup>3[3]</sup> We limit the analysis to white respondents because our goal here was to determine whether white's attitudes toward crime and race were moderated by their residential proximity to blacks. Although the focus of this paper is on the interplay between residential context and media for white attitudes, there is a rich and equally important literature specifying the impact of racial environment on African-Americans (see, Banks, 1984; Powers and Ellison, 1995; Sigelman and Welch, 1993). The lack of a robust black sub-sample, combined with the fact that we do not have measures of exposure to African-American media precludes the analysis of blacks alone.

<sup>4[4]</sup> To increase control over this manipulation, pictures were “morphed” using digital computer software

nonviolent). We created two crime news stories: an armed robbery at an ATM and the theft of a truckload of new computers (see the Appendix for transcripts). Each piece was edited in one simple way: the race of the suspect identified in a mug shot during the story was altered. Thus, subjects were assigned to conditions based on which version of the crime story they saw, the presence or absence of a suspect, and the race of the suspect. An initial analysis determined that the type of crime depicted in the news had no discernible impact on attitudes about race and crime. Apparently, people consider a great number of crimes to be “violent” regardless of government definitions. Given this, the data for the ATM shooting story and the warehouse burglary were pooled. This study produced 289 white respondents.

A specific strain of the crime news script has to do with juvenile crime. Much has been made of the presence of so-called youth “superpredators.” Media accounts describe them as a special breed of criminal –wanton, reckless, dangerous “gangbangers” (Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, and Wallack 1995). As with the basic crime news script, this is thought to apply best to African-Americans.<sup>5[5]</sup>

Study 2 revised the design by manipulating the type of crime (gang crime or no gang crime) and the race of the suspect (African-Americans, versus whites). Subjects were assigned to conditions based on the type of the crime, the presence or absence of a perpetrator, and the race of the perpetrator involved. Thus some subjects saw a gang story without a mug shot of the suspect (see Appendix A for transcripts). Other subjects saw a gang story featuring a white or black suspect. This designed produced a sample of 98 white respondents.

We pooled the two studies in part to reduce the risk of idiosyncratic results: Three different stories were manipulated in very similar ways, by altering the race of a suspect in a

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such that a “black” suspect was created from the picture of a white male, and a “white” suspect was created using the picture of a black male. This added control over the stimulus helps us rule out the possibility that non-racial facial characteristics (like expression) could explain differences in responses to each suspect.

<sup>5[5]</sup> There is some evidence that other groups are also part of the crime news script. For instance, evidence suggests that Latinos are typically depicted in less than flattering ways in the news (Carveth and Alveiro, 1998). In the current study, we wish to make precise comparisons, so we restricted the suspects to black vs. white or no perpetrators.

crime news story. In the analyses presented below, all conditions with an African American suspect are compared to conditions with either no suspect or a white suspect. This allows us to test the marginal difference between exposure to violent crime and exposure to violent crime attributed to African Americans. In other words, we are better able to isolate the effect of racial cues above and beyond the effects of exposure to crime. It should be noted that this specification makes for an especially conservative test of the hypothesis, considering the previously mentioned finding that many whites will mistakenly assume that a crime suspect is black even when none is shown in the news story. If we find effects when racial stereotypes are explicitly and not just implicitly reinforced, then we will have demonstrated a powerful consequence of such portrayals. The subtlety of the design also bears repeating: In each condition, we manipulated merely five seconds out of a total of twelve minutes of news.

### *Measures*

To measure the racial mix of neighborhoods in which our respondents lived, we asked them to give us their zip code information during the sign-in process for the study. Since the smallest demographic unit with racial information available to us from the 1990 Census was the tract, we overlaid zip code information on a map of census tracts in the Metropolitan area. When a zip code fell completely within one census tract, we assigned the tract-level racial demographic information to everyone from that zip code. When a zip code crossed over two or more census tract boundaries (which occurred in only a small minority of cases), we computed a weighted average of the tracts, based on the percentage of residents in the zip code that fell within each tract. Using this procedure, every respondent in our sample was assigned neighborhood racial composition information including the percent of each zip code that was black, white, Asian, and Hispanic of any race.

Blacks have been most commonly associated with the crime script. The conditions in our study contain a black, white, or no perpetrator. Our intent is to determine if residential proximity

to blacks moderates the impact of crime news that features black suspects. Therefore, we decided to exclude other groups from the calculation of the proximity variable. The white/black racial proximity variable was constructed by dividing the percentage of each zip code that was black by the sum of black and white residents in each zip code. In all, 89 different zip codes were represented by the 390 valid cases in our sample. The variable ran from zero percent black to 98% black. However, this variable was highly skewed, with a mean of 8.87% black and a median of 4.56% black. Figure 1 displays a histogram of black percent in each zip code, with bars representing each interval listed below. One can easily identify a large cluster of cases, approximately two-thirds of the entire sample, that fall in the 0-8% range. A smaller cluster of zip codes contains higher levels of blacks, up to about 40% black. Only a few whites in our sample live in areas with more than 40% blacks. Because the distribution displays this bimodal pattern, we decided to split the sample at the 8% black level and compare the low and high black concentration zip codes.<sup>6[6]</sup>

[Figure 1 here]

The actual distribution of zip codes represented in our data makes for a somewhat limited examination of the moderating effects of neighborhood racial context. In general, we would have liked to interview more respondents from areas with a larger percentage of black residents. As it stands, therefore, we must restrict our inferences to the distinction between whites in areas with virtually no black residents (0 to 8%) to whites hailing from areas moderate proportions of blacks (from 8% to about 40%). This fact must be highlighted because it helps to guide the hypotheses specified above.

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<sup>6[6]</sup> We actually tested several cut-points and the results were virtually identical in every case. This suggests that the effect of neighborhood racial context is roughly linear. We tested for this possibility with various Ordinary Least Squares specifications using the full racial context scale, and found that it was indeed the case that proximity has a roughly linear moderating impact on the effect of exposure to the crime news script on attitudes about crime and race. In Table 1, the impact of the full proximity variable is presented, confirming this effect.

The contact hypothesis would only expect interracial proximity to have a beneficial impact on whites if the conditions of that contact were positive and non-threatening. The respondents in our sample were drawn largely from zip codes on the west side of the city, which does not have crime rates nearly as high as the south or east sides. This aspect of our sample led us to speculate that the vast majority of the interracial interactions our respondents had would be crime-irrelevant. In fact, our prediction about the positive impact of proximity to blacks can only be made if whites living in these moderately black areas are no more likely to be victimized than whites living in racially homogeneous areas. We tested this hypothesis by asking respondents from both low and moderate black areas if they had been victimized in the last twelve months. The results are displayed in Figure 2.

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 indicates that the whites in our sample that live amongst moderate numbers of blacks are slightly less likely to report being victimized than those who live in homogeneous white areas. Therefore, we can assume that whites in moderately black areas are not more likely to be exposed to black criminals than are whites in homogeneous white areas. This assumption is all the more secure given the generally low rates of interracial crime in society as a whole. Though the difference is not statistically significant, this finding provides us some solid ground for making a prediction based on the contact hypothesis that whites in moderately black areas might be less likely to accept the racially stereotypic message. Whites living in moderately black areas, therefore, might be expected to have had a wide variety of experiences in their daily lives that contradict the stereotype of blacks as criminals. It is these experiences that might serve as a buffer against the impact of the stereotypic news portrayal.

Our attitudinal variables included the degree to which whites held stereotypic beliefs about blacks. The stereotype battery asked respondents the following question:

*“We want you to rate the following groups in terms of particular attributes that may or may not characterize them. Please consider the group named at the top of each list of attributes or behaviors and rate how well each attribute applies to that group in general.”*

Respondents selected “very well,” “fairly well,” “not too well,” “Not well at all,” or “No opinion.” The traits used to describe blacks that were incorporated into this scale were the following: “Aggressive,” “Religious,” “Law-abiding,” “Sexually responsible,” “Lazy,” “Disciplined,” and “Intelligent.”<sup>7[7]</sup> All traits were coded so that high scores reflected high endorsement of negative black stereotypes. For example, a respondent who thought the trait “disciplined” did not describe blacks well at all would receive a high score, just as would a person who thought “aggressive” described blacks very well. These items were quite reliable indicators (Cronbach’s alpha=.65).

We also asked respondents how closely they identified with various groups. The group identification measure used in these analyses was based on an item worded as follows:

*“Some people feel particularly close to some groups in society: they share the same interests, ideas, and feelings about things with members of these groups. We would like you to think about how closely you associate yourself with various groups in society. Please rate how close you feel to the following groups on a scale from 1 to 10, where ratings nearer to 10 mean you feel particularly close to the interests, feelings, and ideas held by members of the group, ratings nearer to 1 mean you feel distant from the group, and ratings near 5 mean you feel neutral toward the group.”*

The item for blacks was used as a rough measure of out-group closeness among whites.<sup>8[8]</sup> The average score for whites on this item (when it referred to blacks) was 4.76, the median was 5 and the standard deviation was 2.5. In its final form used for these analyses, we

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<sup>7[7]</sup> To reduce the social desirability pressure to avoid negative evaluations of particular groups, respondents were asked whether these same traits applied to whites, Asians, and Hispanics as well.

<sup>8[8]</sup> We would have liked to use some of the standard measures of racial animus, including racial resentment or symbolic racism, but these items were unfortunately omitted from the instrument.

reverse coded the item and divided each respondent's score by 10. This was done to aid in the interpretation of the results, such that all the dependent variables run from 0 to 1, with higher scores reflecting more negative attitudes toward blacks, increasing distance from blacks, or endorsement of more punitive crime attributions and policies.

We also wanted to determine whether attitudes about crime are influenced by the race of the perpetrator featured in a news story, and whether that effect is moderated by the respondent's neighborhood racial context.<sup>9[9]</sup> In order to test the hypothesis that proximity would interact with exposure to the crime news script, we developed scales to measure causal attributions for the crime problem and support for punitive crime policies. In the first scale, respondents read the following setup: *"Here is a list of potential reasons for crime. For each, tell us whether you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, or strongly disagree with the proposed reason."* For these analyses, we selected three explanations for crime that relate to law enforcement and punitiveness: 1. "Inadequate punishment of criminals" 2. "Not enough police on the streets" and 3. "Too many rights granted to the accused." In this scale we also included one item ("a breakdown in the family structure") that is ostensibly unrelated to punitiveness, but may be linked in the public's mind to blacks as a group. We felt compelled to include this item because it has become part of the elite discourse about the causes of crime, especially in the black community.<sup>10[10]</sup> These were coded so that the highly punitive received higher scores. The items were summed and recoded so the scale runs from 0 (weak punishment NOT blamed) to 1 (weak punishment blamed). These three items were reasonably reliable indicators (Cronbach's alpha=.68).

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<sup>9[9]</sup> Unfortunately, these crime attribution and policy agreement items were not included in the "gang-sweep" experiment, so the analysis of these measures is restricted to the experiment including the ATM shooting and the Warehouse burglary stories.

<sup>10[10]</sup> We ran these analyses with an attribution scale including and excluding this item, and the results were almost identical in size and significance. The scale excluding this item has a lower reliability (.59), so we decided to include it.



We created a second measure of crime attitudes by combining three items that tapped respondent's support for punitive crime policies. The question-heading read: "*Now here is a list of potential remedies for crime. For each remedy, tell us if you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.*" The three specific punitive crime policies we used here were: "Enforcement of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder," "Putting more police on the street," and "Three strikes and you're out legislation." Again, high agreement was coded highly on the additive scale composed of these three items. The items were only marginally reliable indicators (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.50$ ); nonetheless, they all reflect support for a punitive crime policy agenda and they closely match the crime attributions scale discussed above.

We also need to control for factors that might be correlated with black proximity that might alternatively drive the differential impacts of the stimulus that are predicted by our hypotheses. For example, we know that education and income are correlated with percent black in a zip code. This raises the possibility that these socioeconomic factors, and not black presence, are interacting with the stereotypic stimulus to produce results consistent with our hypotheses. Since education has been associated with lower levels of racism (Sniderman & Piazza, 1992), it is possible that education, and not racial context, moderates the impact of racialized crime news.<sup>11[11]</sup> In addition, political predispositions such as party identification and ideology could differ across the various neighborhoods and these differences might in fact be responsible for the interactions we predict between black presence and the stimulus. Finally, we need to control for political attentiveness as differences in this variable across neighborhoods might also produce different reactions to the crime stimulus. Note that the proper specification for these controls is not simply to include them as main effects in some multivariate analysis, but to also include interactions between these controls and the stimulus.

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<sup>11[11]</sup> Of course, if it is true that education suppresses the negative impact of exposure to the racial crime script, we should see the opposite of the effects documented so far: Those in mixed neighborhoods, with lower levels of education, should also react more negatively to the crime script. We find just the reverse. Nonetheless, it is important to control socioeconomic influences to determine the independent moderating impact of neighborhood racial context.

## Results

We begin by examining the effects of the interaction between racial proximity and exposure to the crime news script on racial stereotypes. We used ANOVA to analyze the impact of the stereotypic crime stimulus interacted with the dichotomous black presence variable in the zip code.<sup>12[12]</sup> Figures 3 through 6 display the results of these ANOVAs (controls for other correlates of racial attitudes are included in Appendix B). Figure 3 displays the results of the analysis of racial stereotypes. We find that those from neighborhoods with relatively high concentrations of blacks are somewhat *less* more likely to accept negative stereotypes about blacks after being exposed to the crime script. Those from more racially homogeneous neighborhoods, however, are more likely to endorse negative stereotypes after such exposure.<sup>13[13]</sup> This interaction is statistically significant ( $F=5.65$ , 1 df,  $p<.05$ ).

[Figure 3 here]

Next, we look at another measure of racial attitudes: “distance” from blacks. Figure 4 shows the results of this test. Once again, neighborhood context appears to moderate the effect of exposure to the black crime script. When subjects saw a crime story without full confirmation of the script, neighborhood proximity was not associated with feeling distant from blacks. Among those exposed to the fully confirmed black crime script, however, context appears to matter. It pushes those from racially homogeneous neighborhoods further from blacks, while leading those from racially heterogeneous neighborhoods to feel less distant. This interaction is statistically significant ( $F=4.72$ , 1 df,  $p<.05$ ).

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<sup>12[12]</sup> Several alternative specifications were employed, both using different binary cut points for the black percentage variable, as well as multiple regression analyses in which the continuous black percentage variable was interacted with the stimulus. Identical inferences were made using any of these alternative specifications. Therefore, we chose the ANOVA procedure because it produces mean estimates for the various groups that can be easily displayed.

<sup>13[13]</sup> It is interesting to note that respondents from neighborhoods with high black presence start out more strongly agreeing with negative stereotypes than do those from less mixed neighborhoods. But, these groups are differentially affected by the stimulus, so that those from heterogeneous neighborhoods end up lower on the negative black stereotype scale than those from homogenous neighborhoods.

[Figure 4 here]

In Figure 5 we display the mean level of punitive crime attributions under each exposure condition. When exposed to the straight crime cue without a black perpetrator, whites from neighborhoods low or high in black concentration are nearly equally likely to agree that “weak punishment” and or “a breakdown in the family structure” contributes to the crime problem. However, fully reinforcing the crime script with exposure to black suspects polarizes whites according to the black proximity variable. Those living in areas with a relatively high black presence are less likely to endorse these explanations for crime after seeing the black suspect. Those from areas with relatively few blacks become more likely to agree with punitive explanations and/or the breakdown in the family structure. The interaction between neighborhood proximity and exposure to the fully actualized black crime script is marginally significant ( $F=3.05$ , 1 df,  $p=.08$ ).

[Figure 5 here]

The second set of crime attitudes focused not on explanations, but on solutions for the crime problem in America. Figure 6 demonstrates an almost equivalent pattern of results for this related attitude. When white respondents did not see an African American suspect, neighborhood proximity to blacks was unrelated to support for punitive crime policies like three strikes legislation or the death penalty. Again, however, the fully actualized crime script drove the residential categories in opposite directions. Those from relatively high black-presence neighborhoods were less likely to endorse punitive crime policies, while those from homogeneous neighborhoods were more likely to endorse these same measures. Again, the interaction was statistically significant ( $F=3.95$ , 1 df,  $p<.05$ ). This result is further confirmation of our extension of the social contact hypothesis: neighborhood proximity may provide alternate experiences upon which to base attitudes about crime, thus making it easier for people from such neighborhoods to counter-argue the crime script so common in local news coverage.

[Figure 6 here ]

## Discussion

Overall, we find strong and consistent support for an extension of the social contact hypothesis in these results. When looking at either attitudes about blacks as a group, or more indirectly at crime attitudes, the effects of exposure to the crime script depended significantly upon an individual's frame of reference - the racial composition of their residential locale. This study demonstrates that, in the absence of reliable first-hand information about African-Americans, television crime news may have a significant impact on how white Americans reason about matters of race and crime. Again, we should emphasize the strength of our test is bolstered by the inclusion of many interactive controls that represent alternative hypotheses to the ones we outline at the beginning: Controlling for socioeconomic status, political predisposition, and political awareness does not eliminate the moderating impact of racial context. In fact, the full ANOVA results presented in Appendix B indicate that none of these alternative variables serve as powerful or consistent moderators of the impact of the stimulus.

We would remind readers about the comparative advantages of our study. First, we employ a novel experimental design that enables the accurate estimations of causal effects. This is especially important for studies of "racialized" communication, since exposure to such content is usually confounded with many other individual influences. Previous studies have attempted to measure the relative impact of direct (interpersonal) versus indirect (mass mediated) exposure to stereotypic information solely with self-report data (Fujioka, 1999), but these studies do not directly measure or manipulate exposure to the stereotypic portrayals. Second, our experimental manipulation is subtle. The fleeting glimpse of a particular suspect characteristic in our news stories is all that is manipulated, such that subjects were less likely to guess the true purpose of the study. Third, the study was administered to a relatively large number of adults (not college sophomores) in an environment more closely resembling people's home viewing experiences (not a campus laboratory). Our subjects came with friends and family, chatted amicably with one another, and consumed refreshments. Finally, we added contextual information, based on the

United States Census, to information from the experimental study. In this way we link both aggregate and individual level data to account for variations in opinionation on race and crime.

While we believe our results are generalizable to most large urban centers, future research might vary the experimental site by region, television market size, and racial mix. For example, would the interactions we find in this paper hold for a city like Birmingham or Atlanta (see, Glaser, 1994)? Does the presence of large Hispanic populations matter (e.g., San Antonio, Texas)? What about cities with very small minority populations (e.g., Fargo, North Dakota)?

Future research would also benefit from more refined measures of social contact. Measures of residential density patterns have the advantage of being fairly straightforward and comparable across locations. On the other hand, it would be useful to supplement such data with information about the racial composition of people's social networks. More than simple proximity, how does working, praying, and playing together interact with media cues to influence public attitudes? Do the interactions vary by the nature of the contact? Finally, we would also like to extend the experimental design. For instance, varying the race and gender of the victim in a crime news story would provide further leverage on the crime script. Is the most complete version actually a violent crime, committed by a black perpetrator, against a white woman? By varying stimuli across a wider range of potential race cues, we could better map the contours of these exposure effects.

In conclusion, this paper shows that how people think about race and crime is a function of both contextual and mass mediated influences. When exposed to negative racial stereotypes in the news, white respondents living in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods expressed more negative stereotypic evaluations of blacks, felt less close to blacks as a group, and endorsed more punitive explanations for and solutions to the issue of crime. In many ways, these results are optimistic. Interracial proximity, hence contact, allows whites to counteract negative media messages about African-Americans. In the real world, in contrast to the media world, African-Americans play a wide range of social, political, and economic roles in American society. This is

more readily apparent to whites that live in closer proximity to African-Americans. Thus “where you live” interacts with “what you watch” to influence how you think about race and crime.

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Figure 1

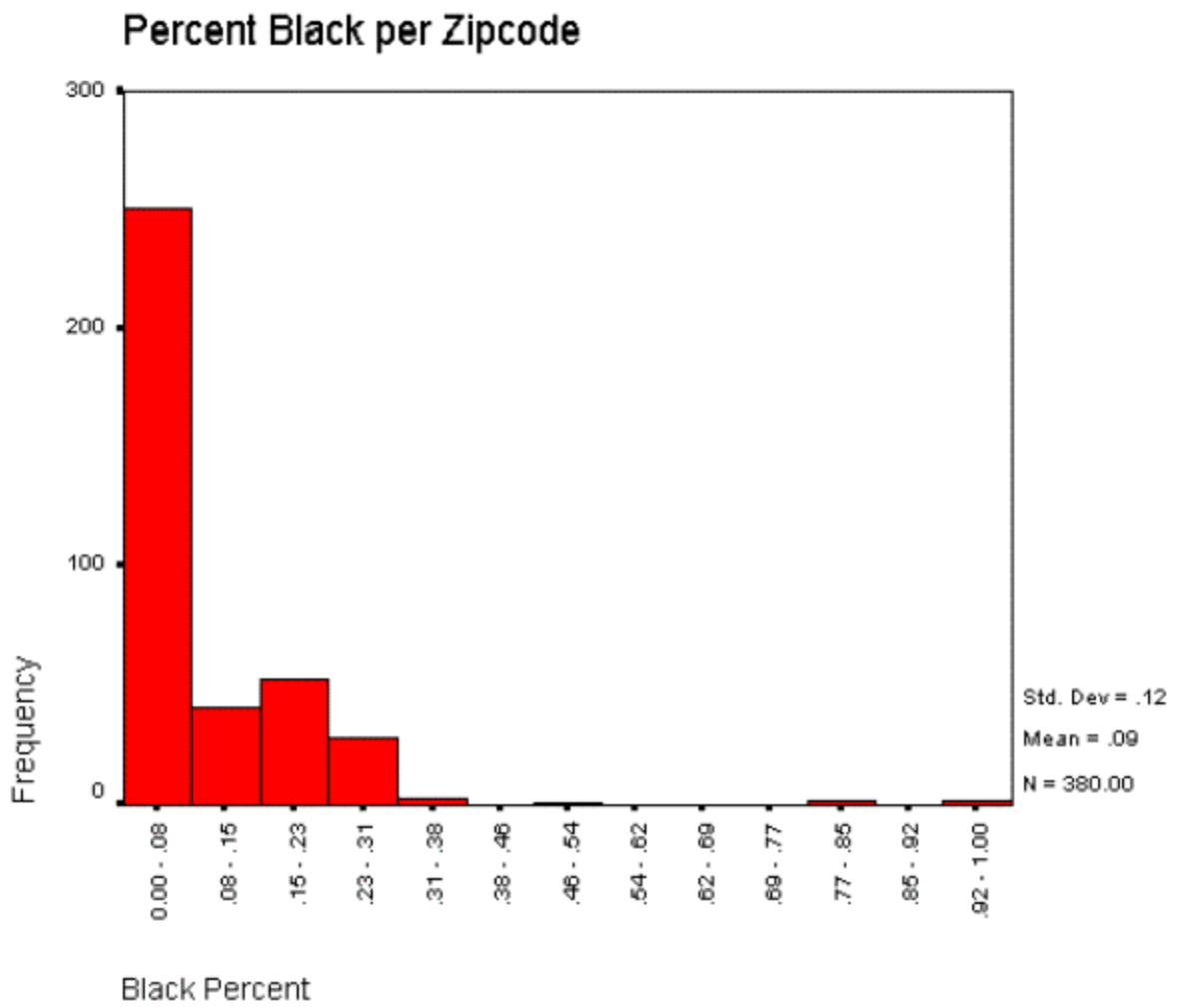
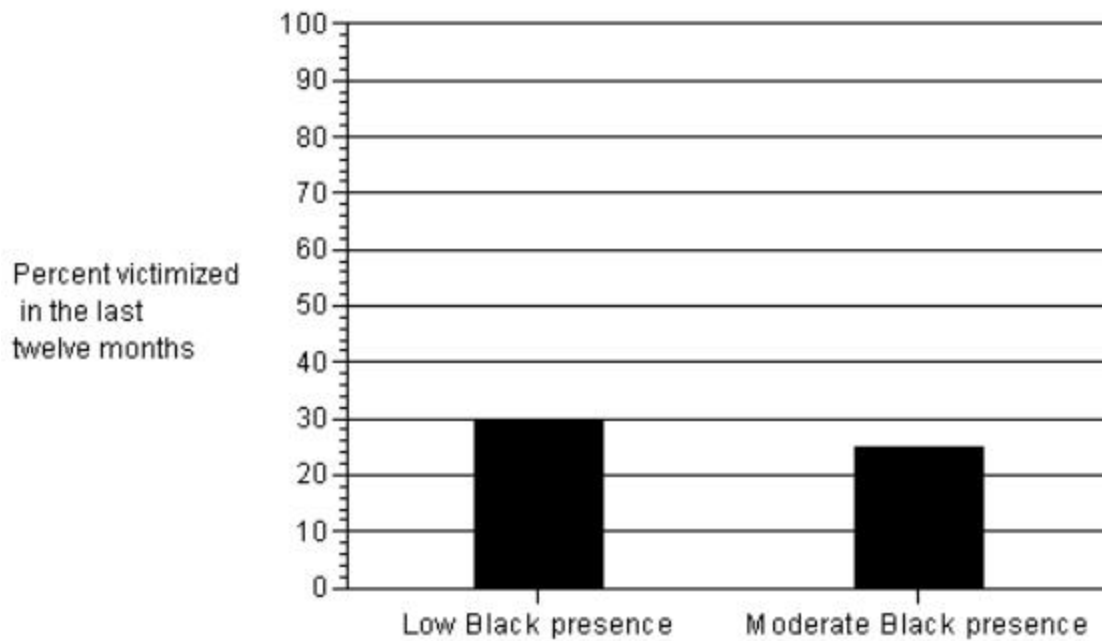


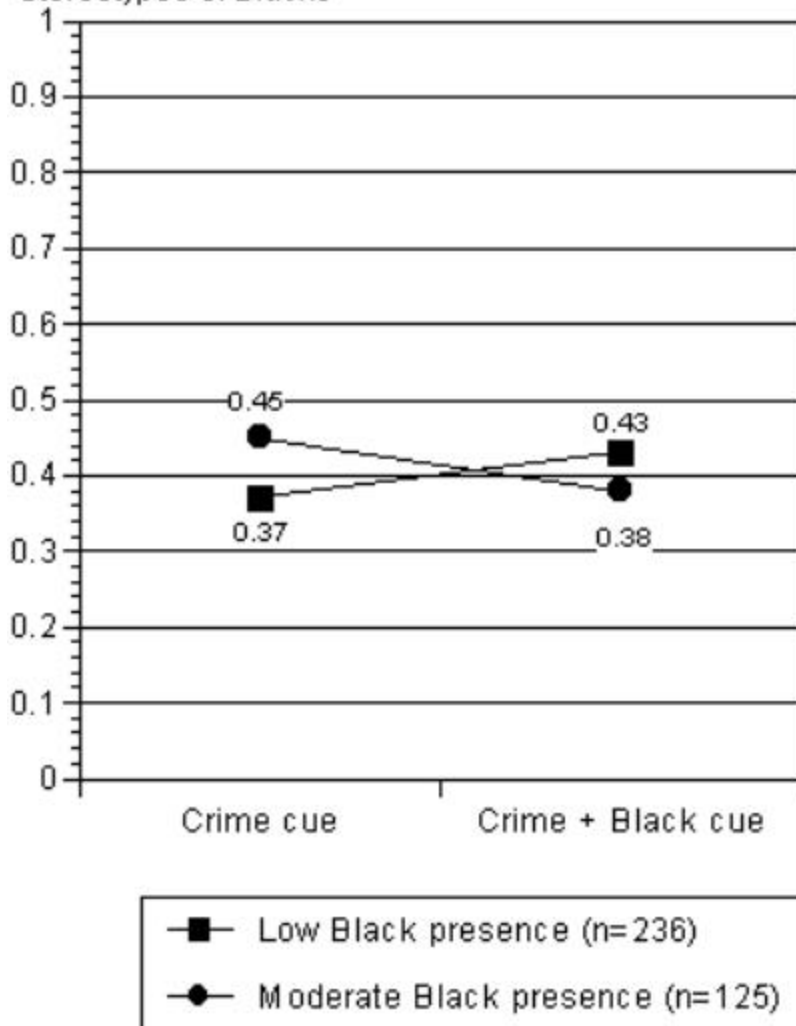
Figure 2. A comparison of self-reported victimization rates in low versus moderate black zipcodes



Note: Bar height represents the percent who answered "yes" to the question "In the last twelve months, were you or anyone in your household a victim of a crime such as robbery, assault, car theft, or any other type of crime?" In the total sample, there were 305 cases in the "low" black areas, and 153 cases in the "moderate" black areas. The cutoff point was 8% black.

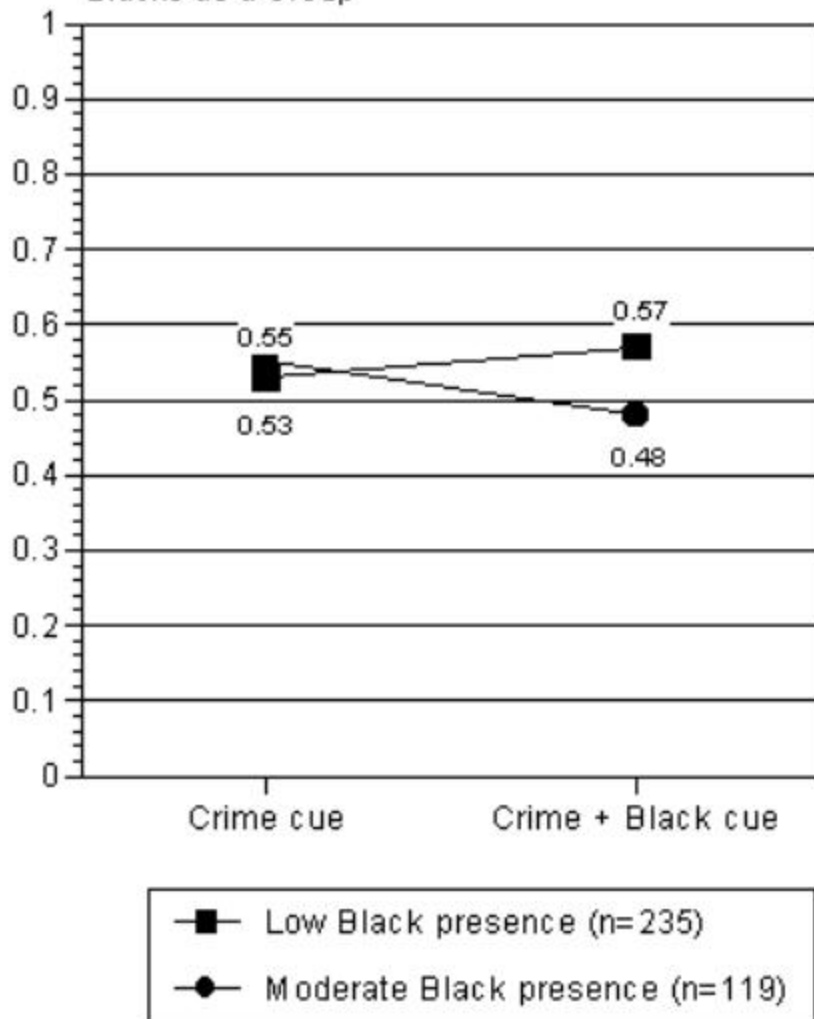


Figure 3 Crime news and Endorsement of Negative Stereotypes of Blacks



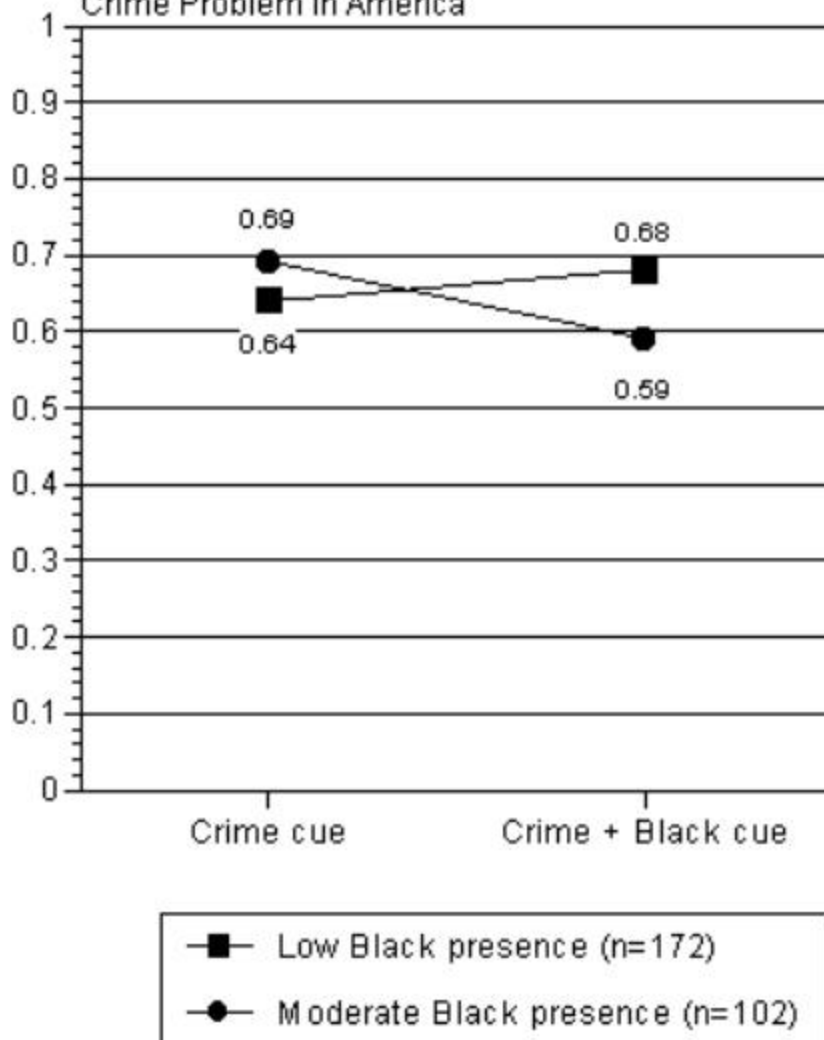
Note: In an anova, the interaction between frame and neighborhood proximity was significant:  $F = 5.65, 1 \text{ df}, P < .05$ . Party identification, ideology, education, income, and newspaper readership were included as covariates. All significance tests are two-tailed.

Figure 4. Crime news and Feeling "Distant" from Blacks as a Group



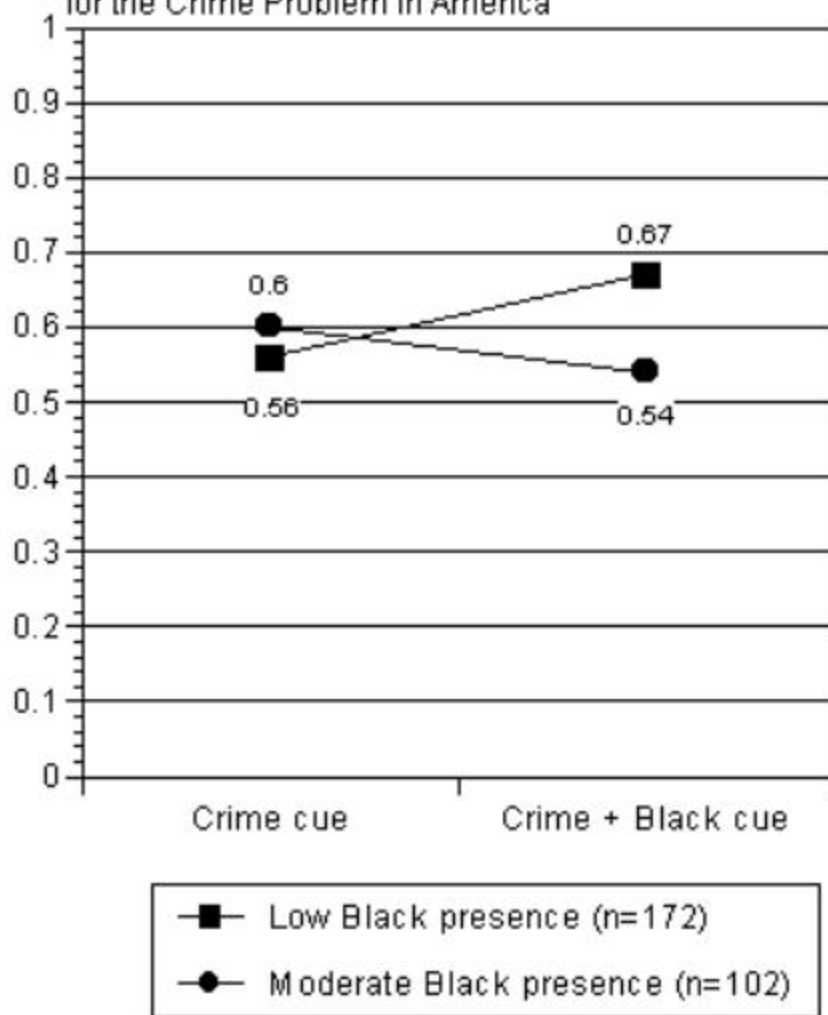
Note: In an anova, the interaction between frame and neighborhood proximity was significant:  $F = 4.72, 1 \text{ df}, P < .05$ . Controls for party identification, ideology, education, income, and newspaper readership were included as covariates. All significance tests are two-tailed.

Figure 5. Crime news and Punitive Causal Attributions for the Crime Problem in America



Note: In an anova, the interaction between frame and neighborhood proximity was marginally significant:  $F = 3.05, 1 \text{ df}, P = .08$ . Party identification, ideology, education, income, and newspaper readership were included as covariates. All significance tests are two-tailed.

Figure 6. Crime news and Punitive Policy Solutions for the Crime Problem in America



Note: In an anova, the interaction between frame and neighborhood proximity was significant:  $F = 3.95, 1 \text{ df}, P < .05$ . Party identification, ideology, education, income, and newspaper readership were included as covariates. All significance tests are two-tailed.

## Appendix A

### Story #1: ATM shooting

#### Transcription of Narration/Audio

#### Video/Graphics

Anchorwoman: “A search is on tonight for a gunman who shot and killed a man today in Encino while the victim was sitting in his jeep.”

Video of crime scene, police cars and crime scene tape mark the area.

“The gunfire broke out shortly before two o’clock this afternoon. The shooting, in broad daylight, has left neighborhood residents very scared.”

More video of crime scene. Video of neighborhood.

Neighborhood resident, female: “On our block we have at least fifteen kids playing on the front lawn with their parents. Imagine something like this happening in front of your house? I mean, it’s really scary.

Video and audio of female neighborhood resident. Crime scene is shown in background, policeman are present.

“Police are looking for the gunman last seen driving away in a blue, two door Honda Accord. Police believe the suspect may have argued with the victim before he was shot.”

**Full screen mug shot of suspect is shown for approximately five seconds.**

Story #2: Warehouse full of stolen merchandise

Transcription of Narration/Audio

Video/Graphics

Anchorwoman: "A big bust in Orange County this morning, about \$750,000 worth of stolen merchandise was discovered in a warehouse on Kramer Place in Anaheim. Eight suspects are under arrest, each being held on one million dollars bail."

Anchorwoman sitting in front of inset graphic of warehouse full of electronic equipment.

Police officer: "We have confirmed that 2 of the loads were stolen. Two of the others have not yet been confirmed by there is a strong suspicion that they had been stolen."

Close up of white officer speaking.

Anchorwoman: "Among the items found in the warehouse: 400 television sets, toys, computers, lamps, appliances, and furniture. Later in the day the sheriff's department also raided a warehouse in downtown Los Angeles."

**Mug shot of suspect inserted for approximately five seconds here.**

"There they found over \$250,000 in camcorders and denim jackets. Officers think the suspects arrested earlier are connected to

More video of stolen merchandise.

these stolen goods as well.”

Story # 3

Transcription of Narration/Audio

Video/Graphics

Anchorman: “Tonight, police in Long Beach have launched a city-wide crackdown on gangs, and thus far there have been fifteen arrests. The operation is being conducted by a gang violence suppression task force. Police have already questioned a number of gang members. Let’s go now to Sharron Tay for the latest on tonight’s big operation. Sharon?”

Video of policemen searching a dark alley.

Reporter: “At this hour Hal, a task force from the Long Beach Police Department is indeed combing the city looking for gang members and already they have arrested fifteen people for drug possession and sales, outstanding warrants and parole violations. Now the sweep is all part of a city-wide effort to make the streets safe.”

Video of white police officers meeting at headquarters.

Reporter: “About one hundred members of the gang violence suppression task force are briefed on their mission before hitting the streets. Tonight, they fan out across 4 areas of the city, where there is high crime. The first stop is the central area, a known gang hangout.

**Full-screen still mug shot of two suspects, both white or black. Shown for approximately 5 seconds.**



Here, several suspected gang members are stopped on probable cause.”

Reporter: “In this case, both men are admitted gang members arrested for driving with a suspended license.”

Officer: “Well, you got some officers that saw one or more the suspects drinking in public, which is a violation of the municipal code here in Long Beach. And they stop them for drinking in public, and that quite often will lead to something more serious.”

Video of white officer giving interview.

Reporter: “Reporting live from Long Beach, I’m Sharon Tay, now back to you in Hollywood.”

### Appendix B.

ANOVA of neighborhood racial proximity as a moderator of the impact of racialized crime news on attitudes toward blacks and crime, controlling for education level, family income, party identification, ideology and newspaper readership.

	Negative black stereotypes	“Distance” from blacks	Punitive crime attributions	Punitive crime policies
Intercept	62.493***	109.686***	45.119***	30.621***
<b>Black proximity * black crime script</b>	<b>5.649*</b>	<b>4.721*</b>	<b>3.052^</b>	<b>3.954*</b>
Party Id * black crime script	.037	.017	.066	.077
Education * black crime script	.134	.052	3.221^	.004
Ideology * black crime script	.079	1.945	.554	.808
Income * black crime script	3.116^	.163	.524	.000
Newspaper * black crime script	1.022	.001	1.287	3.432^
Black crime script	1.635	.639	.012	2.080
Black presence	.066	.364	.107	.345
Party Id	.699	2.556	.002	.527
Education	.462	2.911^	.518	.226
Ideology	1.963	.391	7.034**	5.606*
Income	.059	.000	4.018*	4.727*
Newspaper	1.664	.004	1.123	3.302^
	N= 361	354	274	274

Note: Entries are F ratios. All significance tests are two tailed and based on one degree of freedom. ^ p<.10; \* = p<.05; \*\* = p<.01; \*\*\* =p<.001. Education was coded dichotomously, with those attending college =1 and all else=0. Family income was a 6 level variable with categories for under 15K, 16-30K, 31-50k, 51-75k, 76-100k and over 100k. Party identification was coded trichotomously with -1=Democrat, 0=Independent, other, and 1=Republican. Ideology was measured with the 7-point libcon scale running from 1=very liberal to 7=very

conservative. Newspaper readership was coded dichotomously with 1=reads a daily newspaper and 0 = does not read a daily newspaper.