Interracial Rape: Examining the Increasing Frequency Argument

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A number of researchers have recently challenged the long-held notion among criminologists that rape, along with most other violent crimes, is an intraracial crime. Based on analysis of survey data they concluded that black rapists "prefer" or "seek out" white victims and that the likelihood of a black offender selecting a white victim has been increasing during recent years. Data presented here (1977-88 National Crime Surveys) refute the notion that black rapists "prefer" white victims. Moreover these same data fail to support the contention that rapes involving black offenders and white victims have been increasing. According to National Crime Survey estimates, the proportion of black offenders that victimize whites has been declining.

The notion that black males have a biosocial drive to rape white women has long been a dominant ideological feature of race relations within the United States. Such thinking was used to justify both racial segregation and the severe formal and informal punishments handed out to black males accused of violating race/sex norms (Myrdal 1944; Cox 1948; Allport 1954; Schulman 1974). Initial research on the subject, however, was not supportive of this reasoning. Amir (1971) reported that interracial rape constituted only 7% of the rapes reported to the Philadelphia police department during the years 1958 and 1960. Only 3% of all reported rapes involved black offenders and white victims. Eisenhower (1969) found that 10.8% of the rapes in his nationwide data involved offenders and victims of different races. Approximately 10.5% of the victimizations in his study involved black offenders and white victims (also see Reiss 1967).

More recent data and analyses, however, tend to be less supportive of intraracial thinking. Katz and Mazur (1979), LaFree (1982) LeBeau (1984) and Wilbanks (1985) reported large increases in the proportion of rapes involving black offenders and white victims (hereafter referred to as BW rape), and no parallel increases in the proportion of all rapes involving white offenders and black offenders.
victims (hereafter referred to as WB rape). These circumstances were the consequence of either sexual desire among African American offenders for white women, increased social interaction between blacks and whites, or a general hostility among black offenders for whites (also see Curtis 1976). LaFree (1982) LeBeau (1984) and Wilbanks (1985) claimed that support for race-motivated theory went beyond findings of increased frequency. LaFree and Wilbanks argued that the relative frequency of black offender/white victim rape in the United States was high enough to categorize the aggregate victim-selecting behavior of African American rapists as interracial. Moreover LaFree (1982) and Wilbanks (1985) suggested that American criminologists were ignoring this fact for political reasons.

The Recent Debate

Eight of ten studies examined by Katz and Mazur (1971) reported much higher levels of interracial rape than the 7% found in Amir’s (1971) Philadelphia data. A high watermark of 40.3% was recorded in a 1974 study of Denver, Colorado. Each of the eight articles that reported levels of BW victimization substantially above Amir’s finding were based on the police files of a single urban center (either Oakland, California; Washington D.C.; Denver, Colorado; or Dade County, Florida). Of the eight studies, only one (Schiff, 1969) was published before Amir’s Philadelphia study.

From their analysis, Katz and Mazur concluded that reported cases of interracial rapes had increased and that rapes involving white victims and black men, or men from another minority group, accounted for most of that increase. However, since none of the ten studies examined reported that interracial rape constituted 50%, or more, of known rapes, Katz and Mazur reasoned that rape remained an intraracial crime. They offered one possible explanation for the increasing frequency finding; “the changing climate of racial relationships with its increasing aggression and violence” (1971, p. 106).

LaFree (1982) combined an analysis of previous research findings and National Crime Survey data to conclude that the likelihood of a black offender raping a white woman was increasing. LaFree, however, was less cautious with his conclusion than Katz and Mazur. He argued that the level of BW victimization was high enough, at that time, to define the aggregate behavior of African American rapists as interracial or race motivated.

His interracial conclusion was reached by finding the ratio between the percent of all rapes that were BW and percent of all rapes that were WB (percent BW/percent WB). BW and WB victimizations would have to comprise an equal proportion of all rapes for the behavior of black and white offenders to be considered equally interracial (percent BW/percent WB = 1). Ratios varying for 1:1 indicate other-race motivation among offenders. For example, if 30% of all rapes during a given year involved black offenders and white victims and 6% of all rapes involved white offenders and black victims, the aggregate behavior of black offenders would be considered interracial; since BW rapes were five times