

**EXCLUDED: THE CURRENT STATUS OF
AFRICAN-AMERICAN SCHOLARS IN THE FIELD OF
CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE ¹**

By

Vernetta D. Young, Ph.D.

and

Anne T. Sulton, Ph.D., J.D.

Crime and delinquency are raging out of control in every major urban area in this nation. Dead bodies on street corners, young gangsters flashing “signs,” and drug sales are nearly as commonplace as children boarding school buses, postal employees delivering mail, and sanitation workers collecting garbage.

Since the turn of the century, African-American criminologists have studied these issues. Hundreds have written books, articles, or monographs describing or explaining these phenomena. They also have delivered theoretical- or research-oriented papers at scores of conferences and professional meetings. Yet their contributions have been virtually ignored.

When reading supposedly comprehensive reviews of major theoretical paradigms, the unsuspecting observer would conclude that African-American criminologists have no ideas about crime and delinquency. When examining lists naming scholars awarded substantial sums of money to conduct large-scale research projects, one might assume that African-American criminologists have no interest in conducting empirical investigations. Lists naming scholars to serve as members of groups recommending public policies rarely include the names of African-American criminologists. And seldom are African-American criminologists included on the editorial boards of criminology journals, on the policymaking boards

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of criminology organizations, or on the criminology faculties of colleges and universities. Even the news media disregard the perspectives advanced by African-American criminologists.

On the other hand, ideas advanced by white criminologists have assumed prominent positions in the field of criminology. Millions of dollars each year are spent developing, testing, and refining their theories. And literally billions of dollars are spent implementing programs based on their ideas. Yet the ideas advanced by white criminologists have consistently produced utterly impractical, obscenely costly, shockingly inefficient, and wholly ineffective results. By all accounts, crime and delinquency are unraveling the nation's basic social fabric, straining its capacity to finance criminal justice administration, taxing its ability to respond quickly to challenging social problems, and testing its resolve to respond humanely to offenders.

The pace of this nation's progress in understanding and controlling crime and delinquency is dreadfully slow. This unfortunate situation exists, in part, because the field of criminology has developed with, little recognition of the perspectives advanced by African-Americans.

This article, therefore, represents an initial step toward quickening our pace toward progress. Its primary objective is to encourage scholars and policymakers to include the perspectives advanced by African-American criminologists.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

Whether there is a distinct theoretical paradigm that can be classified as the "African-American perspective" is subject to debate. Varying views are expressed on a wide range of topics. However, since the turn of the century, several dominant themes have emerged from the writings of African-American criminologists. Among the most prominent is that crime and delinquency in African-American neighborhoods can be attributed to whites' segregative and discriminatory attitudes and practices against African-Americans (Greene 1979). African-American criminologists, as a group, consistently argue that racism, discrimination, and segregation are inextricably interwoven with crime and delinquency. For example, Vontress (1962) argues that crime can be attributed to "a melange of causes stemming

from the patterns of segregation and discrimination uniquely imposed on the minority group by the dominant group” (p. 108), while J. Davis (1976) viewed crime as “a complex reaction to oppression.” Many writers have pointed to specific economic, social, or political problems such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, over-crowded housing, inadequate nutrition, and differential law enforcement (Vontress 1962; L. Davis 1976; Banks 1977; Barnett 1977; Bell and Joyner 1977; Brown 1977; Edwards 1978; Primm 1987; Sulton 1989). Of particular note are the 1987 issue on race and crime in Volume 16 of *The Review of Black Political Economy*, Myers and Simms' (1989) *The Economics of Race and Crime*, and discussion in a special issue of *Social Justice* guest edited by Headley (1989) and containing works by Coramae R. Mann and Daniel Georges-Abeyie.

In general, African-American criminologists adhere to the notion that social structural inequities produce variations in opportunity structures which cause differential pressures for criminal conduct. Thus, the incidence of illegal behavior in African-American neighborhoods is significantly related to and affected by those social structures that substantially influence the life experiences and are outside the immediate control of the individuals involved in such behavior.

Particular characteristics of individual offenders or groups of offenders are infrequently the target of African-Americans' analyses. Offenders usually are viewed as victims of society's indifference to the plight of the poor, oppressed, and downtrodden (Miller 1909; Vontress 1962; Headley 1989; Perry 1989). However, African-American criminologists seldom suggest that individual offenders are not responsible for their conduct, citing the fact that most African-Americans are law-abiding citizens (Bell and Joyner 1977; Sulton 1989). Rather, they usually argue that because crime is a social phenomenon, it requires that offenders' behavior be evaluated within the context in which it occurs. In other words, “to understand the phenomenon of crime we must cast it against a socioeconomic backdrop” (Conyers 1977, p. 21; Myers and Simms 1989).

In essence, many if not most African-American criminologists take a holistic approach. Crime is not viewed as an isolated social problem, completely separate and distinct from other social ills plaguing the African-American community. Rather, crime is viewed as a symptom of other social

problems and occurring within a multidimensional and dynamic setting (Sulton 1989).

African-American criminologists also have challenged the theoretical adequacy of existing explanations of crime and victimization in the African-American community. Some have argued that these explanations are based on misconceptions and myths about the African-American community derived from untenable assumptions about the historical impact of slavery on the African-American family (Young 1980). Moreover, although the myths have not received empirical support, the popularly accepted negative characteristics of African-American women and complementary characterizations of African-American men have been employed to deny them equitable treatment (Young 1986). Others have argued that theories of crime causation purporting to explain the involvement of African-Americans have negated the impact of cultural and racial identity by assuming that variables which tend to explain the behavior of non-African-American individuals are necessarily adept at explaining the behavior of African-Americans (Covington 1984, 1986; Austin 1989).

In addition to studying the etiology of criminal and delinquent behavior, African-American criminologists have focused their attention on describing the statistical dimensions of the crime problem. They, like their white counterparts, examine available data such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation's annual *Uniform Crime Reports*. However, unlike many of their white counterparts, most African-American criminologists question the usefulness of available data. They proceed cautiously, noting that the data provide little insight into the relationships between variables or the meaning of such relationships. And most of these scholars steadfastly argue that the data should not be used to assert that African-Americans are more criminal than whites (Vontress 1962; Brown 1974; Davis 1976; Scott 1976; Napper 1977; Bell and Joyner 1977; Sulton 1989).

Many African-American criminologists reject arguments that African-Americans are disproportionately involved in crime. By examining a broader array of data, such as the U.S. Census reports, these scholars conclude that African-Americans are *proportionately* represented in crime statistics as offenders. For example, the National Minority Advisory Council on Criminal Justice (1980) concluded that the relative involvement of African-Americans in crime is more in line with their ranking on the "misery

index” than in their contributions to the total population. And Bell and Jenkins (1990) asserted that although poverty is related to homicide, when holding income constant, “racial/ethnic differences in homicide are greatly reduced or disappear” (p. 146).

African-American criminologists generally are frustrated by their white counterparts’ insistence on using available crime data to show that African-Americans are disproportionately involved in crime, arguing that it is unprofessional to make such an allegation because the concept of “disproportionality,” as employed by many white criminologists, is based on the groundless assumption that the contribution of African-Americans to the total population should somehow influence their contribution in other areas. Completely ignored by these white criminologists is the qualifier: “all things being equal.” Totally disregarded is the fact that all things are not equal. And masterfully understated is the fact that the vast majority of African-Americans are not involved in any type of crime.

In our view, white criminologists intentionally present the relationship between race and crime in a superficial and nonscientific manner because it is consistent with their stereotypical view of the African-American community. It supports their belief that whites are superior to non-whites and that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities.

African-American criminologists frequently base their assumptions on a broader view of America and more carefully consider the relationships between or among crime, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and a host of other social ills. They often argue that when comparisons are based on a wider variety of variables, which describe the conditions under which African-Americans live, then the involvement of African-Americans in crime is not, in fact, “disproportionate.”

In other words, African-American criminologists generally maintain that if one is going to make comparisons, it is necessary to first make certain that the groups compared are, in fact, comparable. This is not an unknown concept. The technique of carefully “matching” subjects for the purpose of comparison is used extensively by white criminologists, except when the issue of race is raised. Somehow, this concept mysteriously vanishes.

In addition to identifying causes of crime and examining methods by which it can be measured, African-American criminologists have explored ways in which it can be prevented. Many recommendations have been offered (Sulton 1989; Bell and Jenkins 1990). The following are among those most frequently noted:

1. Equal and just administration of criminal laws
2. Equal access to educational opportunities
3. Economic revitalization of African-American neighborhoods
4. Community control of institutions and agencies providing services to African-American neighborhoods
5. Improvement in African-Americans' quality of life
6. Teaching African-Americans conflict resolution skills
7. Providing productive activities for African-American youngsters
8. Enacting legislation aimed at curbing handgun sales
9. Improving African-Americans' racial identity.

Brown (1988) concisely summarized and accurately reflected the position held by most African-American criminologists when he stated:

Thus, any sincere effort to deal with the crime problem must address the problems of unemployment, underemployment, substandard housing, inadequate health care, physical deterioration, teenage pregnancy, economic development, self-esteem, drugs, family deterioration, racism and discrimination, plus other social and economic ills. (p. 104)

EXTENT OF EXCLUSION

Exclusion by White Criminologists

Despite the fact that African-American criminologists have been interested and active, their perspectives generally are not included in the vast majority of criminology or criminal justice textbooks authored or edited by white criminologists. For example, Greene (1979) compiled and published *A Comprehensive Bibliography of Criminology and Criminal Justice Literature by Black Authors from 1895 to 1978*, which contains over 300 entries. But few of these works are incorporated in reviews of major theoretical

paradigms or in major treatises on the policies and procedures of criminal justice agencies.

Even where African-American criminologists have made immensely important contributions to the field, contributions that would rival any of those made by the most outstanding and often noted white criminologists or criminal justice practitioners, their works are largely ignored in textbooks authored or edited by white criminologists. For example, Dr. Lee Brown, an African-American criminologist and the nation's current drug czar, is among the most prolific writers in the field, having authored several books and numerous articles. He has long been recognized as one of the most outstanding experts in the area of policing. Dr. Brown has served as police chief for Atlanta, Houston and New York City. He has served on several national commissions and is frequently interviewed by members of the press. However, seldom are his views among those discussed in white criminologists' supposedly comprehensive reviews of issues pertaining to policing. Similarly, the late Lloyd Sealy's contributions have been ignored by white scholars. Before serving as a department chair at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Professor Sealy was a high-ranking officer in the New York City Police Department. He coauthored one of the best written and most important books in the area of police-community relations and authored numerous articles. Yet references to his works rarely are found in white criminologists' books.

Articles published in criminology and criminal justice journals reflect a similar pattern of exclusion. African-Americans seldom find their articles among those published in the 30 refereed journals most frequently read by criminologists and criminal justice practitioners.

The lack of African-American criminologists on the editorial boards of these journals may account for this discrepancy. Editorial boards determine which topics are worthy of consideration and which voices are heard. For example, when examining the membership lists of ten of the leading refereed journals' editorial boards, we found that only two of the 157 members listed are African-Americans.

Publications in refereed journals and citations to these publications are substantial measures of professional acceptance and success. Membership on committees of professional organizations is another important indicator of

a scholar's accomplishments. In recent years, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences and the American Society of Criminology have increased the number of African-American scholars serving on committees. Although some progress has been made, more must be done to ensure that African-American criminologists are assigned to committees which set policy and determine the organizations' agenda.

At nearly every juncture, white criminologists have excluded African-American perspectives on crime and delinquency. As a result, the participation of these scholars in the field has been severely limited. According to the National Minority Advisory Council on Criminal Justice (1980),

This kind of self-indulgence on the part of white social scientists continues only because many of them have carefully avoided genuinely challenging new intellectual thrusts from minority scholars which would force them into a real confrontation with their own contradictions and myopia.(p. 7)

Whether the exclusion is conscious and deliberate or unconscious and unintentional is subject to debate. The fact remains the same: African-American perspectives on crime and delinquency are absent.

Exclusion by Criminal Justice Practitioners

The idea that criminal justice agencies discriminate on the basis of race is one of the field's most controversial issues. Policing in African-American neighborhoods has been under tremendous scrutiny, as have prosecutors' charging decisions, judges' sentences, and prison guards' treatment of inmates. Yet seldom are African-American scholars invited by these agencies to provide technical assistance, to develop training programs, or to conduct studies. The millions of dollars spent each year by these agencies are used to retain the consulting or research services of white criminologists.

A refreshing change from this pattern of exclusion can be found when agencies contract with the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives or the Police Foundation. African-American criminologists frequently participate in these two organizations' technical assistance and

research activities. As a result, in policing, we have seen a number of substantial changes. For example, there have been significant increases in the numbers of African-American line officers and chief executives. We also have observed the development and implementation of policies promoting better police-community relations as well as policies aimed at controlling police misconduct. Although many problems remain, the evidence clearly suggests that the participation of African-American criminologists has played an important role in these advances.

Although local police departments can point to many instances when they have worked with African-American criminologists, the progress of courts and corrections agencies in this regard is unremarkable. These agencies rarely include African-American criminologists among those consulted or commissioned to conduct studies.

Exclusion by Policymakers

Elected and appointed government officials often solicit the opinions of criminologists. Criminologists frequently are appointed to commissions or receive contracts to conduct research on specific crime problems, such as drug abuse or youth gang violence. When reviewing lists naming those consulted or commissioned by policymakers, we found that policymakers typically seek advice from white criminologists. African-American criminologists are seldom consulted or commissioned.

There are several instances where “minority commissions” have been established. For example, the National Minority Advisory Council on Criminal Justice (NMACCJ) was established in 1976 by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). NMACCJ’s membership was comprised of African-Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians. However, NMACCJ’s report, as well as other reports authored by African-American scholars, have not been widely circulated. Some allege that these reports were intentionally “buried” because the conclusions reached by commission members were politically unpopular.

Exclusion by Funding Sources

Public and private sector funding sources have awarded research grants to African-American criminologists. However, there are only a few

cases in which the amounts received by these scholars exceeded \$100,000. It is the rare occasion when African-American criminologists are cited as principal investigators on large-scale projects; seldom are they included as project consultants or data collectors by white criminologists receiving the large grants.

For example, NMACCJ (1980) found that during 1975 and 1980, the federal government's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention awarded nearly \$55 million to researchers. Not one grant was awarded to a non-white researcher. NMACCJ (1980) stated that

historically, especially since 1965, the groundswell of research funds on all governmental levels earmarked for investigative inquiry on or about minorities have, in the main, gone to white institutions of higher education, governmental or private agencies. The myopic research perspective of this group of social scientists has precluded any significant minority participation in the subsequent projects which these funds supported. (p. 8)

Without adequate financial resources to conduct research, African-American criminologists are unable to empirically test their theories or to explore the policy implications of their ideas. When white criminologists do not provide African-American criminologists opportunities to work on major research projects, the latter's views are excluded and they are unable to gain the experience needed to manage similarly-sized research projects. More important, the quality of the research conducted is seriously compromised.

Much of the research conducted by white criminologists on inner-city crime problems is suspect. Frequently, the theoretical bases, research methods, and data manipulation techniques that they employ are seriously flawed. In other words, there is a lack of professionalism because "contemporary social science techniques have been little more than modern sophistry designed and developed to further legitimize institutional instruments of racist and classist ideology of the status quo" (NMACCJ 1980, p. 8).

First, white criminologists "bring with them professional habits, and ideological baggage that are incompatible with what concerned minority

investigators feel is satisfactory social science research” (NMACCJ 1980, p. 8). As a result, their research questions are inappropriate, their hypotheses frequently incorrect and their research methods “insensitive” to African-Americans’ culture and values (NMACCJ 1980).

Even if white criminologists clearly understood these issues, formulated relevant research questions, and developed appropriate research methods, their research reports on inner-city crime problems must be carefully scrutinized. It is difficult at best for white criminologists to collect accurate information from African-Americans. One of the effects of racism and discrimination is that African-Americans, particularly those living in inner-city neighborhoods, deeply distrust whites. These individuals either refuse to participate in research projects or provide less than candid responses to questions posed by white researchers.

Given the fact that very few white criminologists understand the African-American community, most misinterpret the data they do collect. Few white criminologists have direct experience with African-Americans beyond a mere cordial greeting or brief conversation. White criminologists generally lack familiarity with the history, languages, gestures, values, and cultures of the African-American community. They simply do not have an in-depth knowledge of the African-American experience.

On the other hand, African-American criminologists were raised in predominantly African-American neighborhoods and continue to reside in or regularly visit relatives or friends living in these neighborhoods. As a result, these scholars not only have better access than their white counterparts to those African-American populations that are frequently “objects of scholarly inquiry” but possess a broad and deep understanding of African-Americans. For these reasons, African-American criminologists are better equipped than their white counterparts to conduct research on inner-city crime problems.

Some observers might argue that African-American criminologists have an equal opportunity to obtain sizable research grants because grants are awarded through a competitive process. Only the naive believe that the playing field is level. Many research grants are awarded from discretionary funds — there is no competition for these grants.

When there is competition, the manner in which the requests for proposals are written effectively exclude African-American criminologists' participation. Funding agencies usually shape the requests for proposals based on the theories advanced by white criminologists. African-Americans frequently disagree with these theories, and their rejection of the basic assumptions included in the requests for proposals places African-Americans at a distinct disadvantage. In other words, African-American criminologists essentially begin "the race" several yards behind their white counterparts because they must start by challenging the theoretical framework in which the grant applications will be evaluated.

Consequently, African-American criminologists often are discouraged from submitting grant applications to many public and private funding agencies because of their fundamental disagreement with the perspectives advanced in these agencies' requests for proposals. Discouragement also results from realization that funding agencies are inclined to fund those criminologists having published extensively in refereed journals or having completed other major research projects.

Exclusion by Members of the Press

The editorial boards and assignment editors of news organizations are interested in crime and its control. When stories are prepared, news reporters often seek information from criminal justice practitioners. But they also frequently look to those sitting on the faculties of colleges and universities to provide detailed explanations about the causes of crime or to offer opinions about long-range strategies to control it.

Criminology and criminal justice faculties are predominantly white; most have no African-American scholars. Consequently, the public receives the perspectives of white criminologists. Much of the information given to the press by these scholars is based on their personal perceptions of the crime problem in African-American neighborhoods rather than on the results of rigorous empirical research. The public is provided little information by white criminologists with which to challenge the completely unfounded notion that crime and race are inextricably intertwined. Consequently, the public is led to believe that African-Americans are responsible for most of the crime.

This is a particularly disturbing situation. Atlanta's former mayor, Maynard Jackson (1977) contended that

we have cultivated an environment through the press and other forms of mass media which promotes aspects of crime that tend to give support to the myth that blackness and criminality are synonymous terms. (p. 30)

He maintained that race should not "raise a presumption of criminality" (p. 29).

EFFECTS OF EXCLUSION

There are several obvious effects of excluding African-American perspectives and limiting their participation in the field of criminology. First, the field has developed with little recognition of the ideas advanced by African-Americans. As a result, the issues have been defined without the benefit of the knowledge possessed by those most likely to understand important components of the phenomena under investigation. Consequently, few theories on crime causation have any practical value (Brown 1977).

Second, there is a disturbing overreliance on data published in the *Uniform Crime Reports*. Criminologists are preoccupied with "crunching numbers" generated for wholly other purposes. Too frequently, available data are first examined and then theories are developed. This is simply unprofessional. Theory formulation should precede data collection. Otherwise, as we too often observe, criminologists fail to even consider whether they are seeking answers to questions relevant to the issues at hand. And as Napper (1977) succinctly reminds us, this approach "blatantly generates false perceptions of crime and ... provides the basis for believing that criminality is synonymous with blackness" (p. 15).

Third, there is an emphasis on funding large-scale data collection efforts, nearly all of which are conducted by white criminologists. As a result, money frequently is not available to fund the advancement of alternative theoretical or policy-oriented perspectives. Smaller, innovative, issue-specific proposals offered by African-American criminologists are not funded, supposedly because no money is available. Consequently, the quest to establish the field as a legitimate academic discipline is stymied.

Fourth, there is a tendency for criminologists to respond to irrelevant questions posed by criminal justice practitioners, policymakers, funding sources, and members of the press. These parties encourage criminologists to ask “how many fit into this category?” before asking why the categories were developed and if the categories are appropriate for the issues under consideration. And these same parties too readily adopt policy recommendations without understanding the targets of those policies. The obvious absence of African-American perspectives, as well as their possible contribution to the development of appropriate questions and the recommendation of policies suitable to the targets of those policies, are unquestioned.

Perhaps the most telling effect of excluding African-American perspectives is the fact that criminologists and criminal justice practitioners have made very little progress in understanding crime or its causes. Scholars and practitioners are even unable to accurately describe the nature and extent of the crime problem. We still do not know how much crime occurs, and there is little consensus about what causes it. Indeed, the most practical recommendations for controlling crime frequently come from individuals outside the field.

HOW TO INCLUDE THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Obviously, the perspectives of African-American scholars must be included if this nation is to make progress in understanding and controlling crime and delinquency. We propose that the following steps be taken:

1. White scholars should include the perspectives advanced by African-American scholars when they write books or other major treatises, edit books, and compile bibliographies.
2. White scholars and funding agencies should make certain that African-American scholars are included as consultants or researchers when large-scale research projects are conducted, particularly those focusing on inner-city crime problems.
3. Professional organizations and refereed journals must include African-American scholars on their policymaking committees and editorial boards.

4. Criminal justice practitioners and policymakers must include African-American scholars when seeking advice or technical assistance and when establishing commissions.

We anticipate that arguments will be made concerning the difficulty of locating adequate numbers of African-American scholars to participate in the aforementioned activities. While acknowledging that the number of these scholars is small, we reject arguments that they cannot be found.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We realize that some readers might attempt to dismiss our argument that African-American criminologists are excluded by pointing out that we lack empirical evidence to substantiate our claims. Others might contend that our argument is no more than impressionistic musings of two disgruntled African-American criminologists. We challenge these critics to provide evidence to the contrary.

Certainly, there are some African-American criminologists noted in a few white criminologists' books. There are some with publications in refereed journals. There are some sitting on the editorial boards of refereed journals or occupying important positions in criminology organizations. There are some having received sizable research grants, as well as some serving on commissions and being contacted by the news media. But for the most part, African-American criminologists' perspectives are being totally ignored. The number of those *included* is so small that they can be counted on one hand and called by name.

While we believe that collecting data to help analyze the reasons for African-Americans' exclusion would be a worthy endeavor, it is not our intention to encourage this type of research. Frankly, because crime and delinquency are such pressing problems in our neighborhoods, we believe that both time and money would be better spent exploring ways to reduce these problems.

Our purpose in taking time to write this article is to remind criminologists and policymakers that African-American perspectives are

virtually absent. We encourage them to listen to more voices so that this nation can make progress in reducing crime and delinquency.

African-American perspectives are virtually excluded from major treatises on criminology and criminal justice. We are seldom consulted, appointed to commissions, or invited to conduct research. We believe that we have been excluded primarily because we challenge many of the basic assumptions proposed by white scholars and because including us requires distribution of financial resources for consulting, technical assistance, and research among a broader group of scholars.

Whether or not one concludes that racism is the basis for African-American scholars' exclusion is immaterial to a resolution of the issues raised in this article. A finding that our white colleagues are racists is simply not relevant to the question of how this nation can benefit from the expertise of African-American criminologists.

Unquestionably, this nation will make little progress in controlling crime and delinquency if it follows its current course. Clearly, the field of criminology and criminal justice will not receive standing as a respectable academic discipline until it demonstrates that it is making worthwhile contributions to this nation's efforts to control crime and delinquency. History suggests that neither goal will be accomplished without the full participation of African-American criminologists and inclusion of African-American perspectives.

One would err by concluding that the foregoing discussion suggests that white criminologists are unable to make useful contributions. We are not suggesting that these scholars are incapable of studying crime or are unfit for service as consultants or researchers. Rather, we argue that this nation's ability to control crime and delinquency is stymied because of a reluctance to include the ideas advanced by African-American criminologists.

This article demonstrates that African-American scholars have been excluded. We argue that we must be included and that we can be to the extent that white criminologists, criminal justice practitioners, funding agencies, policymakers, and members of the press are willing to broaden the scope of inquiry and include new voices.

African-American scholars have made and continue to make valuable contributions to the field of criminology. Our contributions must be acknowledged. Our voices must be heard.

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