

# Latino Paradox or Black Exception? Race, Ethnicity, and Crime in the 21st Century

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**Abstract:** George Floyd's murder by a Minnesota police officer sparked outrage, protests, and a re-evaluation of racial inequities in America. Within criminology, we argue, that re-evaluation should include the Latino Paradox, the idea that Latino communities are an exception—a paradox—in that, while they face economic deprivation, they also possess a magical something that makes them resistant to social problems like crime. Unfortunately, this compels the more delicate question; what is the deficiency in Black communities that makes them so vulnerable to crime? However, as we argue here, the Latino Paradox forces a false comparison. Its assumptions with respect to crime are factually incorrect, it demeans Blacks by neglecting their historical context, it romanticizes the Latino experience, and it misdirects policy making. It also leads to lazy theorizing by suggesting that the Latino Paradox forces a re-evaluation of a major criminology theory, Social Disorganization. Indeed, Social Disorganization Theory can adequately explain past and present links between immigration and crime. In light of these problems, it is time to drop the Latino Paradox as an explanation for the race/ethnic differences in crime.

**Keywords:** race; crime; Latino Paradox



**Citation:** Shihadeh, E.S.; Barranco, R.E. Latino Paradox or Black Exception? Race, Ethnicity, and Crime in the 21st Century. *Societies* **2023**, *13*, 123. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13050123>

Academic Editors: Gregor Wolbring and Mathieu Deflem

Received: 21 February 2023

Revised: 20 April 2023

Accepted: 8 May 2023

Published: 12 May 2023



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## 1. Introduction

There is something of a mystery about ethnicity and crime in the United States. For about 100 years, criminologists were convinced that immigration is associated with increasing crime. Indeed, the Big Bang of modern criminology itself occurred back in the 1920's when it explained the most pressing problem of that age—why immigrant communities have such high rates of crime [1]. Some now-legendary thinkers countered the fashionable idea that these new immigrants (mainly from Europe) were just bad people, unfit to be in America [2]. The thinkers countered with a radical new concept; that immigration is a form of social change, and social change is itself potentially disruptive and can create social problems—but only temporarily [1,3]. Eventually, communities reorganize toward a more stable community life. This conjecture was correct, it turns out. Indeed, this powerful notion transformed sociological thought and formed the basis for the foundational Chicago School of ecological thought. It appears in nearly every criminology textbook; it is the unifying principle of countless research papers over the decades, and it is perhaps the oldest and most foundational framework in criminology.

In more recent times, armed with this potent theory and decades of empirical research, criminologists turned their attention to a pressing issue of *our* age, Hispanic/Latino immigration and crime. As these immigrants came across the US–Mexico border prior to the 2008 Great Recession, a wave of anti-immigration sentiment spread like wildfire. A locked and loaded coalition of commentators on the air and in print media joined political hopefuls and full-throated town-hall citizens to shriek at our government to shut the gate [e.g., [4,5]]. In a counter maneuver, criminologists dusted off the grand old theory to explain the inevitable spike in Latino immigrant crime. However, something odd occurred. It

was a false alarm. It turns out that crime in Latino communities was low so there was no “problem” to explain.

The finding collided with the idea, deeply etched in criminology, that poverty and rapid social change increase crime. Publicly, at least, we criminologists shrugged it off and called it an exception. We even gave the puzzle a stylish name borrowed from the health literature; *the Latino Paradox* [6]. It is the apparent conundrum that, even though some Latino communities are immigration intensive, and some are irrefutably poor, their communities are somehow less susceptible to social problems like crime. The (apparent) failure of criminologist’s treasured theory in the face of current evidence was, ironically, politically opportune. The political battle, at least among the informed, was over. However, there was an unintended casualty of the Latino Paradox explanation; Black communities.

The Latino Paradox specifically refers to the finding that, despite levels of poverty similar to Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos have health and crime outcomes closer to non-Hispanic Whites. The explanation for this puzzle is that Latino communities are an exception—a paradox—in that they possess a magical something that makes them resistant to social problems like crime. Unfortunately, this compels the more delicate question; what is the deficiency in Black communities that makes them so vulnerable to crime? However, as we argue here, the Latino Paradox forces a false comparison. Its assumptions with respect to crime are factually incorrect, it demeans Blacks by neglecting their historical context, it romanticizes the Latino experience, it misdirects policy making, and ultimately leads to misguided theorizing about criminology’s foundational theory. It is time to drop the Latino Paradox as an explanation for racial and ethnic differences in U.S. crime.

## 2. The Birth of Social Disorganization Theory

Immigration has long been connected to crime. Back in the early 20th century, immigrants from Eastern Europe [7] and migrants from the Black South [8] settled in Chicago and throughout the Northeast. Because these newcomers settled mainly in poor, high crime areas [1], they faced customary fears about the “immigrant problem” [9]. These suspicions were cloaked in a late-Victorian social Darwinism [10,11], when smug, tea-party intellectuals flatly declared that immigrants were culturally and biologically inferior. Around the same period, the popular “National Efficiency” movement in Britain embraced the fashionable idea that foreigners and the poor are inherently substandard, and for the sake of the empire, they must be banished from civilized society [12].

In the U.S., this racist thinking was expressed in the Immigration Act of 1924, which choked off U.S. immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe and from Asia in favor of immigration from Northern Europe. The logic was firmly eugenic, based on Madison Grant’s (1916) bizarre but highly popular “proof” of racial hygiene. Madison argued that the harsh Northern European climate favored people who were intelligent and adaptable, and purged individuals who were stupid or defective. Over time, this process made Nordics (read: Aryans) the apex of human civilization. Grant credited them with all the great achievements of human civilization—including those of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. In contrast, he regarded Asians as among the lowest form of human life and, for that reason, advocated a complete end to immigration from East Asia. Indeed, this type of scientific racism helped fuel the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in America in the 1920s with their call for “100% Americanism” [9]. Eventually, Grant’s ideas fell out of favor during the Great Depression, when “survival of the fittest” moved from an abstraction in late-Victorian parlor rooms to brutal reality in the soup lines across America. A decade later, a horrified world witnessed the sadistic corollary of eugenics: the Third Reich and a broken world littered with 60 million dead.

In the meantime, sociologists at the University of Chicago found a new way to look at society. It was the birth of the now-legendary “Chicago School” [13]. Founders of this new approach, such as Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay [1], brushed aside social Darwinism and asked a simple yet poignant question: If neighborhoods are “bad” because of their racial or ethnic make-up, then when that make-up changes, why are those areas

still bad? Using decades of data for Chicago neighborhoods, Shaw and McKay come to the powerful realization that the race and ethnicity of neighborhoods change over time, but neighborhood crime rates tend to remain the same. In other words, race and ethnicity did not explain crime. In the stiff-collared, racist climate of late Victorian America, the idea that people's race and ethnicity were irrelevant to explaining crime was a bolt out of the blue. From this compelling finding, a core idea of the Chicago School began to congeal; that the structure of places matters, not the ethnic, national, or racial identity of people.

Back in the early 20th century, when the Chicago School fixated on Eastern European immigration, Latino migration was merely a trickle. However, Latino immigration gradually increased, reaching a crescendo that eventually made Latinos the largest minority in the United States. In 1970, they accounted for just one in twenty; today, they are nearly one in five. Despite this high rate of growth, Latino communities appeared to have low rates of crime, a finding inconsistent with the imagery of Social Disorganization Theory, which hangs a "do-not-disturb" sign at the community gates in order for crime rates to remain low. It is this conundrum that spawned the adoption of the Latino Paradox in criminological literature.

### 3. The Latino Paradox

The Latino Paradox idea actually originated in the health literature where it was initially referred to as an "epidemiological paradox" e.g., [14]. Health researchers found that Latinos experience health outcomes similar to, or sometimes even better than, Whites, despite the fact that Hispanics have higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage [15]. These health outcomes are typically mortality-related, but do not appear to extend to quality-of-life measures like living free of disabilities [16,17]. Furthermore, most health research suggests not *all* Latinos benefit from this paradox. In general, foreign-born Latinos have mortality rates lower than most other groups—including U.S.-born Latinos [18]. This foreign-born advantage may be because migrants are healthier than non-migrants. The advantage of this so-called healthy migrant effect dissipates with successive generations. The foreign-born advantage may also be a statistical artifact. That is, unhealthy migrants may return home to their countries of origin. This so-called salmon effect essentially removes this less-healthy group from the U.S. population<sup>1</sup>.

It is difficult to locate the entry point of the Latino Paradox into the criminological literature. One line of references is traceable to Martinez (2002) who first linked the concept to crime rates. Unfortunately, in examining the literature on this topic, it appears the Latino Paradox concept in criminology is so pliable that one cannot pin down its core meaning. Sometimes the Latino Paradox is just about Latinos. For instance, "... the benefits associated with nativity are particularly pronounced for Latinos." [19] and "... a 'Latino paradox' has emerged whereby Latinos tend to do better across a range of outcomes, including violent crime, than other groups living in similarly disadvantaged neighborhoods" [20]. Other times it is about immigrants as a whole, as in "The unanticipated, but measurable, advantages are enjoyed by the immigrant population generally" [19]. It is also about Latino immigrants specifically: "Particularly relevant is the so-called 'Latino Paradox'—the counterintuitive coupling of generally high disadvantage with low rates of violence in Latino immigrant communities" [21]. It also may be limited to first-generation immigrants: "This is known as the immigrant paradox, whereby first-generation immigrants display better behavioral outcomes than native-born Americans and more highly acculturated immigrants despite relative socioeconomic disadvantages and risk factors that immigrants face" [22].

It is framed as a paradox because it contradicts the long-standing cannon in criminology that poverty generates crime. The collision is encapsulated by Sampson [23] when he states that "Hispanics Americans do better on a wide range of social indicators—including propensity to violence—than one would expect given their socioeconomic disadvantages". Likewise, "... an emerging body of literature has documented a Latino paradox—in the face of adverse social conditions Latinos perform better than expected on a range of social outcomes" [24]. Similarly, "Latinos respond more resiliently to criminogenic conditions relative to similarly situated whites

and blacks, suggesting that these structural effects are not uniform across race and ethnicity” [24], or they are only better off than Blacks: “which suggests that structural constraints have more muted effects on Latino violence than on black violence” [25].

Regardless of how one defines it, the Latino Paradox receives mixed support in criminological studies. Even studies claiming to support the Latino Paradox produce contradictory findings. For instance, Stowell and Martinez [19] find that economic deprivation affects all Latino groups in their study. Clouding the issue further, [24] find support for both the Latino Paradox (i.e., that one group is an exception) *and* the racial-invariance hypothesis (i.e., that no group is an exception). This is simply not possible. To oversimplify, racial invariance argues that all groups are affected similarly by disadvantage and that differences in crime are simply due to the level of disadvantage experienced by different groups [23]. As noted, the Latino Paradox argues that, despite the level of disadvantage they experience, Latino crime is not affected. These two ideas are diametrically opposed and cannot co-exist. In fact, Robert Sampson, one of the earliest and most prominent proponents of the Latino Paradox, when compelled to choose between the Latino Paradox and the racial invariance hypothesis, ultimately sided with racial invariance and pointed to a number of studies showing that, within Latino communities, “ecological disadvantage seems to predict violent crime” [21].

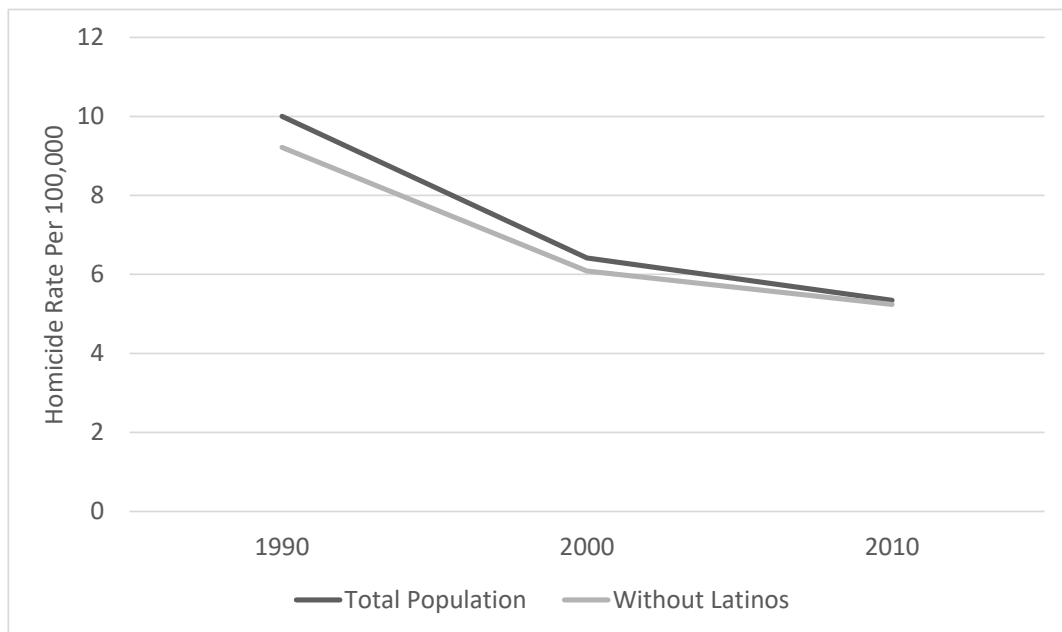
Latino Paradox studies often fall into either of two categories: (1) those examining only one city, a place that would typically be considered a traditional immigrant destination and (2) those that examine a diversity of places, including traditional and new destinations for Latinos. The latter studies, those with a wider geography, consistently show that Latinos are not uniformly immune to the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage (e.g., [25,26]). On the contrary, Shihadeh and Barranco [27,28] reveal that the effect of disadvantage on Latinos depends on location. In traditional Latino destinations, deprivation has little to no effect on crime rates, whereas in new destinations there is a strong effect. This finding, that place matters, is where the “paradox” idea begins to unravel.

#### 4. The Latino Paradox and the Great American Crime Decline

The unexpectedly low crime rate in Latino communities prompted the respected Harvard criminologist, Robert J. Sampson, to claim that Latino immigration, rather than pushing crime rates up, was a leading cause of the Great American Crime Decline of the 1990s. The unprecedented crime decline began in the early 1990s, when homicide rates fell from almost 10 murders per 100,000 people in 1991 to under 6 by the end of the decade [29]. This drop was no coincidence for Sampson, who pointed to the natural experiment unfolding during the 1990s when, as crime rates plummeted, Latino immigrants poured into the country [6]. Additionally, when immigration rates finally leveled off, Sampson notes, so too did crime rates, prompting the conjecture that the decline was due to immigration—precisely the opposite of what the Chicago School predicts.

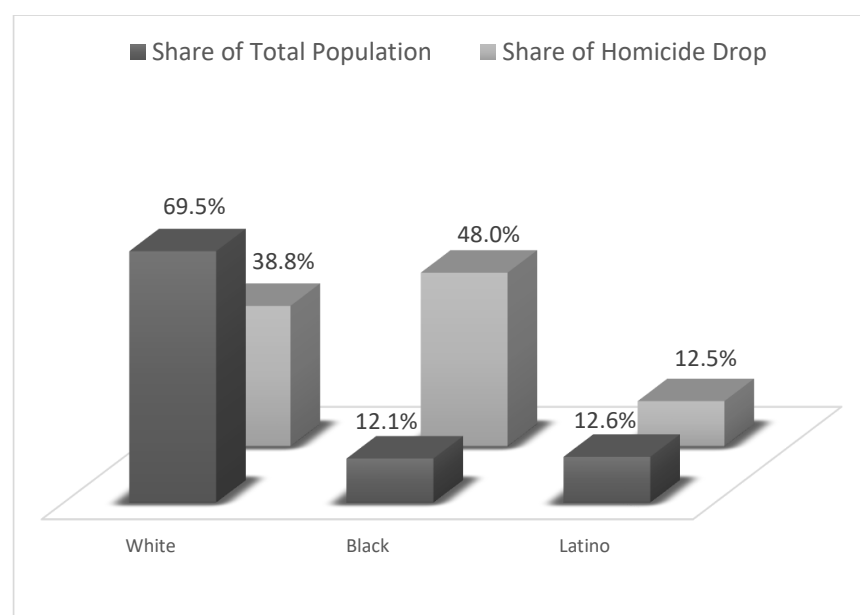
Criminologists leaned away from the old disorganization model and argued that Latinos have low rates of crime because they settled in immigrant enclaves whose benefits are well understood. Ethnic communities can be safe havens or microcosms that serve as staging areas for migrants to begin their gradual integration into society. Hence, Latino immigrants are the exception—the paradox—to the long-standing criminological proposition that immigration can increase crime [30].

Unfortunately, the central premise—that Latino immigration led to or caused the Great American Crime Decline—is incorrect. Figure 1 depicts the national-level drop in homicide victimization rates from 1990 to 2010. The top line in the figure shows the decline in homicide for the entire U.S. population, while the lower line shows the same trend but excluding Latinos. There is little difference between the two lines; the drop in serious violence is the same whether we include Latinos or not. While this renders baseless any proclamations that Latino immigrants import crime into the United States, it also casts doubt that they triggered, led to, or were otherwise responsible for the decline.



**Figure 1.** Change in National Homicide Victimization Rate with and without Latinos, 1990–2010. Source: U.S. Census and National Vital Statistics Multiple Cause of Death Detail File.

More detailed analyses reveal that the crime drop was actually a Black phenomenon. Figure 2 reveals that Blacks accounted for only 12% of the U.S. population between 1990 and 2010 but accounted for 48% of the homicide decline through the period<sup>2</sup>. The Latino contribution to the decline was only 12.5%, nearly identical to their 12.6% share of the total population<sup>3</sup>. The conclusion is unavoidable; the decline occurred without the disproportionate influence of Latino immigration, which undermines the central thesis of the Latino Paradox explanation of the Great American Crime Decline. However, constant appeals to Latino exceptionalism undervalues the hard-fought gains made by Black communities. Indeed, it seems that, when crime rises, Blacks are held culpable; but, when crime declines, they are denied their due credit.



**Figure 2.** Share of the National Drop in Homicide Victimization Rate: 1990 to 2010 by Race and Ethnicity. Source: U.S. Census and National Vital Statistics Multiple Cause of Death Detail File.



## 5. Long Live Social Disorganization Theory

Despite the faulty premise, advocates of the Latino Paradox—criminologists such as Lee and Martinez [31]—even declared the old Chicago framework as no longer relevant for understanding immigration. After all, Latino immigrant communities were apparently some of the safest places around [6]. However, administering the last rites to Social Disorganization Theory is not only premature, it is misguided theorizing. Any similarities between modern Latino immigrant communities and immigrant communities of a century ago in Chicago (upon which the theory was based) are superficial at best. Those arriving in Chicago a century ago landed in *new* and disorganized communities lacking social networks that could regulate community life. Take, for example, the experience of Polish immigrants described by Thomas and Znaniecki [32]. In their landmark study, they painstakingly examined the diaries and personal letters of Polish immigrants living in a transitional (troubled) neighborhood in Chicago. These first-person documents revealed the immigrants' lives to be in upheaval after relocating from Poland to Chicago. The bewildered immigrants struggled at the crossroads of the Old and New World, as marriages failed and children spiraled out of control. Old friends and neighborhood institutions were gone. They were essentially alone, and they were miserable. Compared to the stable, low-crime communities they left behind in Poland, Chicago seemed like a confusing world devoid of any rules.

This is in sharp contrast to the types of areas Latino immigrants settled—traditional destinations in the Southwest and other places were anything but new and disorganized. On the contrary, these were old, well-established immigrant enclaves with a dense web of interrelations developed over a long period of time. These were safe havens that offered newly arrived immigrants opportunities absent elsewhere in America [33].

However, these protective benefits are an incomplete explanation of Latino crime rates. Starting in the 1990s, Latino immigration fanned out from traditional areas of the Southwest to other areas throughout the nation [34]. They moved beyond the social control umbrella of old destinations to new destinations. Sure enough, because these new places lacked the protective benefits of traditional destinations, the Latino homicide victimization rate was 50% higher than in old destinations [28]. In addition, it only gets worse if you examine new Latino destinations *with high immigration*. In those areas, the Latino homicide victimization rate is approximately 13 per 100,000, almost exactly the national homicide rate for Blacks at that time. In other words, in new destinations with high immigration, Latinos were just as vulnerable to serious violence as Blacks. Thus, the Latino Paradox privileges only one group, Latinos in *old* destinations, while denying the same courtesy to Blacks and to Latinos in *new* destinations.

The fact that Latino immigrants' safety depended on their destination merely confirms what Social Disorganization Theory posits, that place matters. This further highlights the core flaw in the Latino Paradox argument that, for some mysterious reason, people matter. This is a violation of the substantive tenets of the ecological school, a set of ideas that explained immigration and crime trends early in the 20th century and can explain them now. Yet, researchers continue referring to a Latino Paradox [35–37] or immigrant paradox [38–42].

We narrow our critique in two ways. First, we criticize the Latino Paradox, specifically, and not a broader notion of an immigrant paradox—at least for now. Second, we focus on the Latino Paradox *as it pertains to the criminological literature* and leave it to others to address its internal contradictions in the health literature. However, with specific reference to Latinos, Burchfield and Silver [20] said it well: “Perhaps, residents in Latino neighborhoods are better able to compensate for structural disadvantage by drawing on networks of social ties for the cultivation of collective efficacy, thereby weakening the association that might otherwise exist between concentrated disadvantage and collective efficacy, consistent with the Latino paradox hypothesis” (p. 169). This aligns with the systemic interpretation of Social Disorganization Theory [43] which argues that, when formal and informal networks are strong, crime declines. However, when those ties are disrupted, the community's capacity for collective action is compromised and crime goes up.

The Chicago immigrants of a century ago and the immigrants of today are no different from each other. The same is true for Latinos in old destinations and in new destinations. They are all the same people who simply settled in different places. When the same people settle in two different social worlds, you obtain two different outcomes. This is no mystery, no paradox, and certainly no exception; thus, there is no need to seek special dispensation from the gods of theory. This only gets us mired in a science-by-exception. On the contrary, this preeminence of place is precisely the value added by the Chicago School perspective. There is no need for a delicate, more sensitive Social Disorganization Theory as called for by Stowell and Martinez [44]. The old one works just fine.

## 6. Latino Paradox or Black Exception?

The rush to portray Latino crime rates as low was an understandable counterweight to the charged, politically motivated, anti-immigration rhetoric. In this heated environment, some rushed out from their fighting corners to confront racism and intolerance. However, in so doing, proponents of the Latino Paradox became political actors themselves. This discouraged the kind of falsification that lies at the core of scientific inquiry and gives way to confirmation bias. It was a form of conclusion shopping that ultimately weakened the epistemological value of research and undermined neutrality. When research is freed from the ideological imperatives of the immigration debate, the reality of crime rates in Latino communities in the United States becomes more complex.

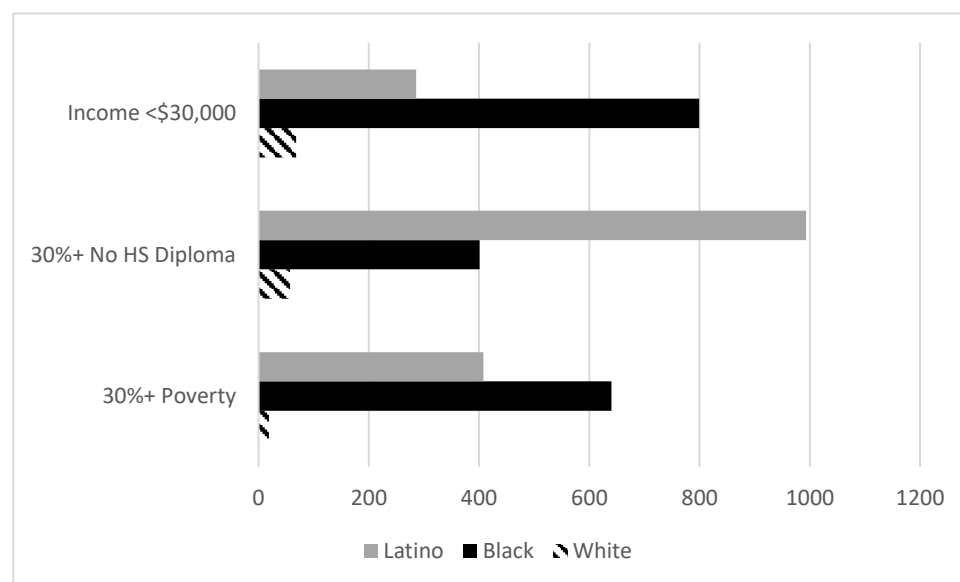
As satisfying as it sounds, the influx of Latinos was *not* the leading cause of the 1990s crime decline in the United States. The source of that decline was in Black communities. Yet, some cling to a Latino Paradox, pointing to the counterintuitive coupling of *relatively* high disadvantage with *relatively* low rates of violence in Latino immigrant communities. This coupling is based on the flawed logic that Latinos and Blacks must somehow share the same socioeconomic space simply because both are poorer than Whites. Granted, the obstacles that Latinos face in comparison to Whites in the United States are real and cannot be shrugged off. However, after the Latino–White comparison is made, there is a long vertical drop to the harsh realities of life in Black communities. There, one finds despair, isolation, and a tangle of social problems for which there is no comparison. Yet, the comparison is made, one that leads to the faulty inference that Latino violence is lower “than one would expect” [6]. That expectation, unfortunately, is an artifact of a false comparison.

This is evident in Figure 3 which shows that, while both Blacks and Latinos experience more disadvantage than Whites, Black disadvantage is still much greater than Latino disadvantage. According to these data, the number of counties with a household median income below USD 30,000 for Whites is less than 90. For Latinos, the number of counties that meet that criteria is three times higher, just under 300. For Blacks, that number is nine times higher, or roughly 800. Proponents of the Latino Paradox are surely aware of this, which might explain the hand-waiving qualifiers such as “generally high” or “relatively high” when describing Latino disadvantage, language that masks the stark economic differences between these communities.

We instead put forth the criminological proposition that Blacks are the exception, not because they contradict a foundational theory, but because of the unmatched brutality of their historical experience (with the exception of Native Americans). Blacks are still more segregated than Whites or Latinos [45], are poorer [46], and live in more concentrated poverty [47]. Blacks have been elbowed out of low-skill job markets with deadly consequences [27,28] and they are 2.5 times more likely than Whites and 50% more likely than Latinos to get a loan denied [48]. There is simply no comparison.

A paradox exists only when something is unexplained or out of the ordinary. However, there is no mystery about Latino crime rates in America. Their violence rates vary between old and new destinations in ways completely supported by theory. Latinos only seem like a paradox when we compare them to Blacks, whose experience is anything but ordinary. Even those attempts to account for the lopsided comparison between Latino and Black life are inadequately captured by “% poor”, “% without a high school diploma”, or “median

household income” in criminological models. The differences go much deeper. Black history is in part a grievous one, a struggle of a founding people of a country in which they are still denied full cultural citizenship. Accordingly, the paradox comparison lacks historical context, is factually inaccurate, and represents faulty theorizing. In this time of racial reckoning, we must put to rest the Latino Paradox as an explanation for crime.



**Figure 3.** Number of counties meeting each criteria in 2010 census. Source: U.S. Census.

**Author Contributions:** Writing—original draft, E.S.S. and R.E.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Restrictions apply to the homicide data used in this study. Data was obtained from the CDC and must be obtained directly from them via special request. All other data are publicly available from the U.S. Census bureau at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov), accessed on 2 February 2023.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As Sociologists and Criminologists, we do not feel qualified to assess the efficacy of the Latino Paradox in other fields. The critique that follows is focused solely on the field of criminology.
- <sup>2</sup> They account for 59% of the drop from 1990 to 2000 and 48% from 1990 to 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> They account for 13.7% of the drop from 1990 to 2000 and 12.5% from 1990 to 2010.

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