Book Reviews


Reviewed by

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For those interested in studying the linkage of race, place, and crime, Peterson and Krivo have become household names. Over the years, this duo has published at least a dozen significant studies that articulate the sources of ethnic and racial residential segregation in the United States and explain how it is linked with structurally inequitable neighborhood environments for whites, African Americans, Latinos, and others. *Divergent Social Worlds* reflects a culmination of decades of work in this area combined with years of data collection and sophisticated analyses, all of which document how the increasingly prominent role of place and the continuing role of race, coupled with the effects of policy, largely account for racial and ethnic differences in crime.

As the title suggests, the book’s organizing concept is the racial-spatial divide—an arrangement in which racial inequality in social and economic circumstances and power in society is combined with segregated and unequal residential locations across racial and ethnic groups. The racial-spatial divide is hierarchical, with whites in the most advantaged and powerful positions and African Americans in the most disadvantaged and least powerful positions. Other groups, such as Latinos and Asians, occupy varying and more fluid positions in between blacks and whites. Poverty overlaps strongly with race along the racial-spatial divide, and this racial concentration of poverty and other socioeconomic disadvantages, according to Peterson and Krivo, leads to a racial concentration of violence. This is because the racial-spatial divide uniquely situates neighborhoods with distinct ethnoracial compositions in terms of the local conditions that encourage (or discourage) and control (or fail to control) crime.

A significant contribution of the book is its integrated theoretical perspective, one that combines insights from the fields of criminology, urban sociology, and racial and ethnic stratification. Within this framework, residential segregation is the linchpin that connects the overall racial order with dramatic racial and ethnic differentials in crime across communities. It does this by reinforcing the complicated web of social and institutional inequalities that privilege white neighborhoods compared to African American, Latino, and other types of neighborhoods. Segregation, thus, is at the heart of why the social worlds of people in the US are so divergent by neighborhood color, and why neighborhood crime is so racialized.
In analyses that comprise separate chapters in the book, Peterson and Krivo test their theoretical claims using data from the National Neighborhood Crime Study (NNCS). For the NNCS, they compiled crime and related data for 9,593 neighborhoods in 91 large cities for the year 2000—no easy feat. The breadth of their data allows for an unprecedented look at the connections among race, place, and crime in the US. Prior research, typically single-city studies, has not incorporated a sufficient number of racially and ethnically distinct, but otherwise comparable, neighborhoods in their samples, thus muddling the picture. For the first time, Peterson and Krivo are able to explore how patterns of neighborhood crime vary across communities of different colors for a representative set of cities across the nation.

In the first set of analyses, they document how crime rates vary substantially across neighborhoods comprising different racial and ethnic groups. In the chapter “Divergent Social Worlds,” they provide a portrait of white, African American, Latino, minority, and integrated neighborhoods and show just how different these types of communities are from one another. Although this is not novel terrain, Peterson and Krivo clearly illustrate the dramatic nature of the racial-spatial divide and remind us just how entrenched social and economic disparities in America’s neighborhoods are.

In subsequent analyses, they address the extent to which differences in relative disadvantage and advantage are sources of inequality in crime rates across the various neighborhood types. They use multivariate models that examine both neighborhood (e.g., residential instability, immigration, disadvantage, residential loans) and city (segregation, region, percentage manufacturing) characteristics as predictors of crime rates. The usual suspects emerge as significant correlates.

A critical issue, however, is that notable gaps in violence remain unaccounted for by racialized community conditions, suggesting that a focus on differentiation in structural conditions within white, African American, and other neighborhoods may be limited. As Peterson and Krivo rightly point out, such an approach overlooks the embeddedness of neighborhoods within a broader spatial context. They ask: How much do the distinct spatial contexts in which white, African American, Latino, minority, and integrated neighborhoods are located contribute to varying levels of crime within these communities?

Peterson and Krivo complete the story by exploring how inequality in the character of nearby neighborhoods contributes to patterned racial and ethnic differentials in crime. They argue a common feature of many African American neighborhoods, whatever their internal character, is proximity to communities with characteristics typically associated with higher crime rates, such as disadvantage and residential instability. In contrast, white areas are often surrounded by neighborhoods where crime-promoting conditions are relatively absent and factors that discourage crime, such as external community investments, are prevalent. In the final set of analyses, we encounter the key finding: White neighborhoods benefit from the dual privileges of low internal disadvantage as well as embeddedness within a context of other white and advantaged areas. African American, Latino, and minority neighborhoods suffer a double jeopardy: They are at risk of greater violence stemming from their own internal—often highly disadvantaged—character and they bear the brunt of isolation from violence-reducing structures and processes because they are surrounded by disadvantaged areas.

Although the analyses leave some important questions unanswered (e.g., what are the mechanisms by which being located near areas with more white residents leads to lower crime rates?) and more could be said in terms of the potential for neighborhood
housing investments to reduce criminal violence (residential loans or community investment emerged as an important predictor throughout the analyses), *Divergent Social Worlds* provides a stunning snapshot and analysis of America’s racial-spatial divide and its contribution to the racial concentration of violence. For those of us who work in this area, this book is destined to be a classic. For those who believe race no longer matters, it is a must read.


Reviewed by

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Thanks to Barack Obama and Sarah Palin, community organizing has recently gotten a big jolt of visibility. Obama often talked about his organizing experience as the “best education” he ever had. But it was Palin’s attack on Obama’s organizing days, at the 2008 GOP convention, that drew nationwide attention to this often misunderstood occupation and triggered a flood of news stories about (and some op-eds by) organizers. John McCain’s attack on ACORN for widespread “voter fraud,” and Obama for his links to ACORN, increased public awareness of the group, and organizing in general. Since Obama took office, the right-wing echo chamber, especially Glenn Beck, have focused attention on Saul Alinsky, ACORN, and social justice “radicals.” Beck even urges Tea Party activists to read Alinsky’s books to learn how to organize. These two books offer readers different perspectives on the fascinating mosaic of community organizing.

Atlas’ *Seeds of Change* is a highly readable and dramatic story, not only about ACORN’s rise and fall, but also about the changing world of community organizing. It is full of fascinating people, colorful anecdotes, and political drama, but it is really a story about the hard but hopeful work of bringing about progressive change. Atlas writes about activists, organizers, and ordinary people learning how to fight for, and often win, better living and working conditions. It is a book about the poor that doesn’t treat them as victims or stereotypes, but as people who, by joining with others in politics and protest, can shape their own destiny, by changing government policy and corporate practices. *(Full disclosure: Atlas is my occasional co-author.)*

Atlas—a long-time antipoverty lawyer and housing activist—shows how ACORN revolutionized the field of community organizing by creating an organization that could wage