Deaths of Despair in Black and White: Gun Violence, Political Economy, and the Case for Macro Intervention

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Abstract: This article argues that elevated levels of gun homicide and gun suicide among younger black men and middle-aged white men, respectively, are the consequences of a political economy that produces widespread despair among the most vulnerable segments of the laboring classes. Understood in this way, these phenomena share a common etiology whose roots can be traced to two major, temporally distinct developments: (1) postwar shifts in the political economy that redefined central cities as sites of black dislocation, and (2) the more recent intensification of globalization and investor class power that has redefined smaller cities, towns, and rural communities as sites of white dislocation. These transformations have rendered working-class blacks and whites (and others) vulnerable to a wide range of maladies and adverse social outcomes, including involvement in gun violence. In addition to examining these political-economic transformations and their effects on black and white working-class communities, this article also explores the divergent racialized manifestations of gun violence within these demographic groups. While micro and mezzo interventions are typically stressed to respond to these issues, their ultimate resolution requires recognition of their common roots in conditions of structurally imposed despair and the concomitant remedy of those conditions at the macro level.

Keywords: Deaths of despair; gun violence; deindustrialization; globalization

Population-level trends in rates of gun homicide and gun suicide among black and white men demonstrate an essentially inverted relationship in terms of both race and age. Gun homicides among black men peak at approximately 100 per 100,000 from late adolescence through the mid-thirties and then diminish dramatically as age increases; levels of gun homicide among white men remain at very low levels, at or below 5 per 100,000, throughout the age distribution. Accordingly, the difference in gun homicide rates for black and white men is greatest during early adulthood and diminishes with age. On the other hand, rates of gun suicide among white men outpace those among black men across the entire age distribution and increase with age to nearly 35 per 100,000 at ages 75–84. Among black men, gun suicides remain below 15 per 100,000 across all ages and generally decrease with age beginning in the mid-thirties. As such, the difference in gun suicide rates among these groups increases with age and is greatest among older adults (see Figures 1a & 1b).

In exploring and making sense of these patterns, this article makes a case for linking gun homicides and suicides within these demographic groups on a basis that goes beyond the focus on firearms as a mechanism. Specifically, the ensuing analysis argues that elevated levels of gun homicide among younger black men and elevated levels of gun

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suicide among older white men are best understood as *divergent, racialized manifestations of structurally imposed despair*.

Figure 1a. *Gun Homicide Rates Among Black and White Males in the US, 2018–2021*
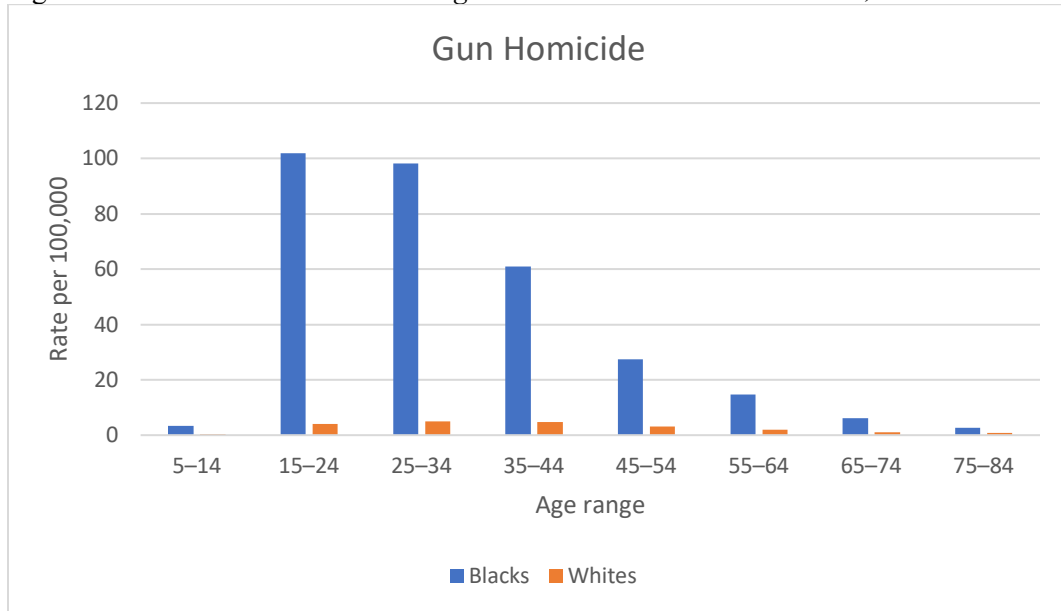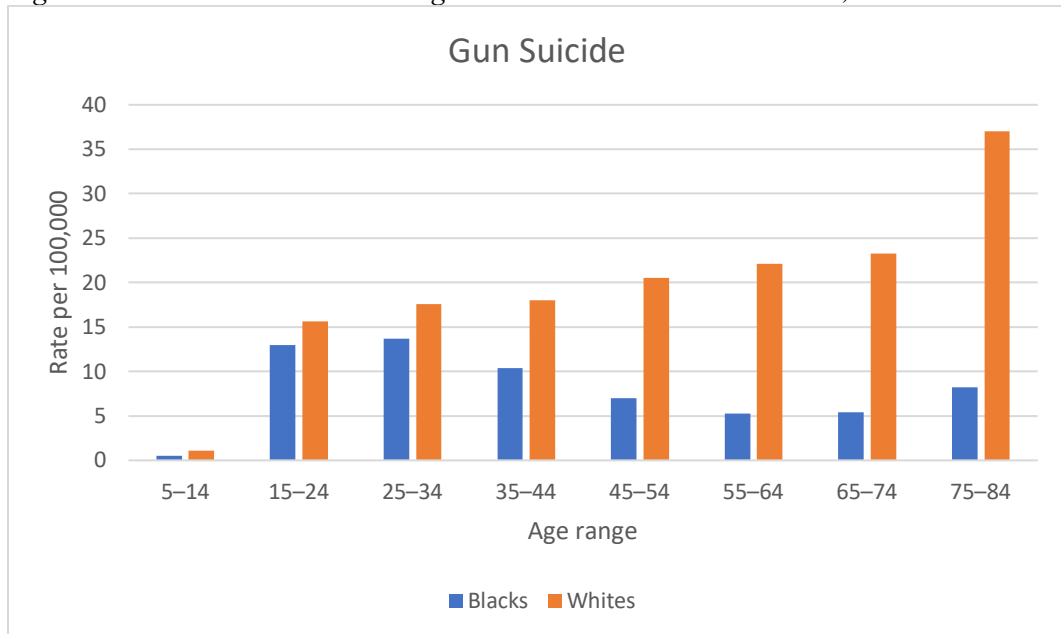

Figure 1b. *Gun Suicide Rates Among Black and White Males in the US, 2018–2021*

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023b.

The focus on black and white men in the current analysis is advantageous for several reasons. One is that, with the notable exception of elevated rates of gun suicide among young American Indian/Alaska Native men, rates of gun homicide and suicide are highest among these two respective demographic groups. In this sense, an analysis of firearm deaths among these populations addresses them in their most acute demographic manifestations. Another advantage to this approach is that blacks and whites have historically occupied opposing poles in the nation's hierarchy of racial ascription (Fields, 1990; Wacquant, 2022). In other words, within the U.S. context, these groups are assumed to be—and, in many ways, have been—most dissimilar to one another and have the least commonality of experience on a broad range of social, economic, and political measures. The focus on black and white men in this article in no way diminishes the reality that gun violence affects other racialized and gendered populations as well. Indeed, connecting these seemingly disparate issues as experienced by black and white men might provide a helpful model for understanding similar phenomena as experienced by other groups. Moreover, because nearly 80% of all homicides and more than half of all suicides in the United States involve firearms, insights regarding the nature of firearm-involved deaths shed light on these phenomena more generally as well (Kegler et al., 2022).

The following analysis utilizes the "deaths of despair" concept that has emerged in recent years to describe rising rates of death from alcoholic liver diseases, drug overdoses, and suicides among middle-aged, working-class whites. Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2020) conceptualize these divergent forms of mortality collectively as deaths of despair, noting that "all the deaths show great unhappiness with life, either momentary or prolonged" and that, as such, "it is tempting to classify them all as suicides" of varying fashions (p. 39). They link sharp increases in such deaths to political-economic transformations that have immiserated widening segments of the white working-class in recent decades: the loss of well-paid, meaningful, unionized work; the decimation of local industries; the collapse of family and community life in many locales. These developments have led to a range of social, economic, and health maladies, including increasing rates of divorce, greater social isolation, widening poverty and joblessness, deteriorating physical health, and intensifying levels of pain. Case and Deaton also note that similar trends were observable in black working-class communities a half century earlier, as central cities lost unionized manufacturing jobs by the thousands: "What happened to blacks and whites differs perhaps more in *when* than in *what*" (p. 62).

The analysis that follows elaborates on this connection with respect to trends in gun homicides and suicides in several ways. First, it situates these trends within a more robust exposition of the political-economic transformations in black urban working-class communities during the final third of the twentieth century and in white small-town and rural working-class communities since the 1980s. Such an account is needed because, while Case and Deaton (2020) persuasively argue that deaths of despair occur "when society fails to provide some of its members with the framework within which they can live dignified and meaningful lives" (p. 8), their analysis fails to adequately explain how and why this happens (Aspholm, 2021). This article also explores the sharply racialized patterns of the respective gun homicide and gun suicide phenomena. Although "race" is often employed as an independent variable in research, as a purely ideological construct,

race is incapable of explaining social reality (Fields, 1990; Zuberi, 2003); the present article develops an alternative analysis in which racialized subjectivity is a *dependent* variable. In addition, while suicide, including gun suicide, is readily understood in terms of despair, gun homicide is less so; the proceeding analysis makes a case for such an understanding. Finally, implications for social work are explored, particularly the need to address the political-economic roots of gun violence in its various manifestations at the macro level.

The Political Economy of Despair

The following sections provide an account of political-economic transformations in black urban working-class communities and white nonmetropolitan working-class communities that precipitated increasing levels of gun homicides and gun suicides among men in these respective locales. The former took shape in the postwar period with long-lasting effects; the latter has been a more recent development, playing out largely over the last three decades or so.

Gun Homicide in the Deindustrialized City

In the three decades following World War II, the American economy grew rapidly, and an increasing share of the nation's gross domestic product went to workers. The New Deal transformed U.S. economic policy and labor relations, funded massive social welfare programs and infrastructure projects, and created a general framework for economic intervention and social engineering on behalf of the laboring classes (Fraser & Gerstle, 1989). Union membership peaked at one-third of all workers during the 1950s, and inequality declined precipitously. Widening segments of the black population shared this general upward trajectory, even before the passage of landmark civil rights laws during the 1960s, as increasing numbers of blacks deserted the sharecropping economy of the Jim Crow South and secured work in unionized urban manufacturing and related industries in the North (Lichtenstein, 2002; Stein, 1998).

Yet the expanding economy and widening prosperity masked emerging contradictions in the postwar economic and social order that became increasingly apparent by the mid-1960s. As a central component of the nation's commercial Keynesianism, the federal government underwrote a massive expansion of homeownership opportunities for the nascent middle class and widening segments of the white working class via insurance for private-sector mortgage loans through the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Affairs (Jackson, 1985). These policies were animated by a desire to promote macroeconomic growth via the home construction industry, which had been dormant since the onset of the Great Depression, and to counteract labor militancy by providing workers with a material and ideological stake in the affluent consumer society as "homeowners" (Self, 2003). Both due to the emphasis on new constructions and deference to the prerogatives of the private banking and real estate industries, existing housing in central-city neighborhoods was largely excluded from eligibility. Moreover, because these policies were designed to bolster and not replace private market actors, and because policymakers lacked a commitment to upending existing racially tiered housing markets, federal housing policies adopted the discriminatory practices of the banking and real estate sectors,

effectively starving black neighborhoods of mortgage capital and barring blacks from new suburban developments (Hirsch, 2000; Reed, 2020).

At the same time, the burgeoning black urban working class confronted the disappearance of unionized industrial work from the cities to which they were migrating. Automation and cybernation in manufacturing increasingly rendered less-skilled labor redundant, leading to waves of layoffs beginning in the 1950s. Black workers, who often lacked the seniority and advanced training of their white counterparts, were disproportionately affected by these layoffs; racism exacerbated the issue (Stein, 1998; Sugrue, 1996). Beyond this, the late 1950s witnessed the earliest phases of what would become a decades-long exodus of manufacturing work out of central cities (Wilson, 1987, 1996). This process was facilitated by federal underwriting of highway construction and massive suburban development. As with automation, it was fueled by corporate profit-seeking: Manufacturers abandoned central cities for suburbs, small towns, and semi-rural areas, particularly those located in the Sun Belt, in search of cheap land, lower taxes, lax environmental regulation, and more pliable labor forces (Gordon, 1977; Walker 1981). In short, by the mid-1960s, the industrial economic base that had long attracted and sustained the urban laboring classes was rapidly collapsing.

The implications of these transformations for central cities in the decades following World War II included the loss of millions of residents and millions of manufacturing jobs. In black communities, rates of joblessness and poverty reached unprecedented levels. For example, by 1970, Detroit had lost a staggering 700,000 white residents, nearly half its peak total from merely two decades prior. Before the close of the 1970s, the nation's former manufacturing capital had also lost 185,000 manufacturing jobs, 55% of its total from the late 1940s. By 1980, nearly two in three black Detroiters were jobless, more than double the rate from three decades earlier (Sugrue, 1996). Similar trends played out across the country, particularly in other heavily industrialized cities, including Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Baltimore, as well as industrial suburbs and satellites like East St. Louis (IL), Gary (IN), and Camden (NJ) (Vergara, 1995; Wilson, 1987, 1996). These losses devastated municipal tax bases and curtailed cities' capacity to respond to the growing needs of their increasingly poor and jobless residents (Reed, 1999). In moving away from New Deal–era approaches to addressing inequality via public works programs and expanded protections for workers, the targeted initiatives of the federal government's War on Poverty were incapable of addressing structural unemployment (Fraser & Gerstle, 1989; Reed, 2020). By the late 1960s, these deteriorating central-city conditions came to be collectively referred to as the "urban crisis" (Sugrue, 1996; Weaver, 2017). While economic growth and landmark civil rights policies facilitated previously unknown mobility for millions of blacks, others faced a dramatically worsening quality of life.

Conditions in the most distressed black urban communities continued to decline in the ensuing decades, as joblessness and poverty proliferated, the black middle class moved out of historic ghettos, and local institutions and infrastructure crumbled. The class-diverse ghettos of the mid-twentieth century were transformed into hyperghettos, "an urban wasteland doubly segregated by race and class" (Wacquant, 2010, p. 216; Wilson, 1987). In Chicago's most dispossessed communities today, for example, half of all residents live in poverty, three in four working-age individuals are jobless, and over 90% of residents are

black (Farooqui, 2017). Such conditions have left black urban working-class communities vulnerable to all manner of social maladies, from familial dissolution and cyclical drug crises to rampant street crime and mass incarceration (Johnson, 2023; Liebow, 1967; Wacquant, 2008).

Within this context, beginning in the late 1960s, gun homicides reached heights not seen since the Great Depression. On one hand, similarly conspicuous increases were observable across all demographics; all age ranges and racial/ethnic groups as well as both men and women saw their rates of homicide victimization roughly double between 1960 and the early 1970s. Yet male homicide rates were four times the rates for females throughout this period, and rates among black men were *ten times* the rates among their white counterparts.[1] While the nation's overall homicide rate rose from 4.7 to 9.8 per 100,000 between 1960 and 1973, rates for black men increased from just over 40 to nearly 80 per 100,000 (see Figure 2). The highest rates of homicide were seen in Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic cities deep in the throes of deindustrialization: By 1970, St. Louis, Cleveland, and Detroit led the nation in per-capita homicide, and Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia also ranked among the top ten (Klebba, 1975). Levels of homicide among black males largely persisted at these levels through the mid-1990s, with a slight decline from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s before a resurgence through the decade that followed.

Figure 2. *Homicide Rate in the US and Among White and Black Males, 1960–1995*
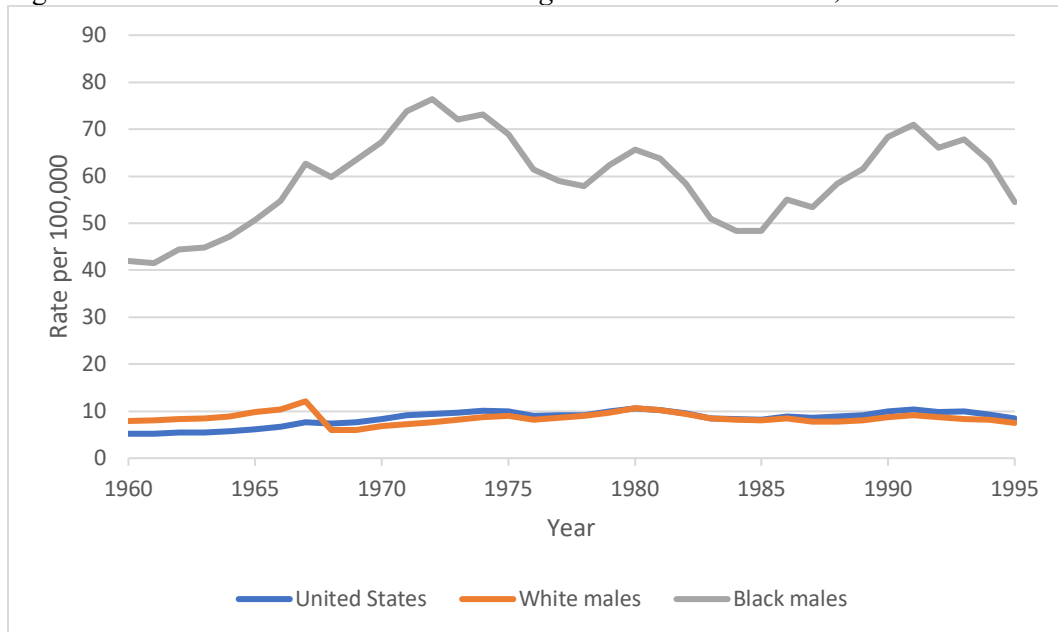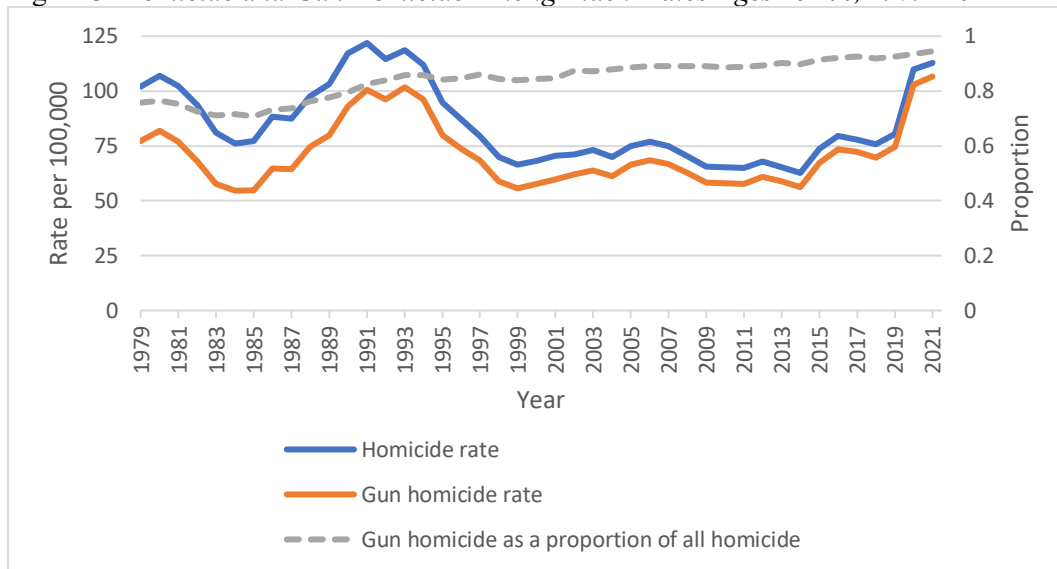

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a, 2020b; Klebba, 1975.

Note: Data from 1960–1967 is age-adjusted, while the data for more recent years is not. On the demographic groups comprising the racial categories from 1960–1967, see note 1.

In turn, from the mid-1990s through the turn of the century, levels of gun homicide dropped precipitously and stabilized thereafter through the mid-2010s. The causes of this

drop are disputed and complex, but likely involve some combination of the end of the crack cocaine crisis, changes in policing, rising imprisonment, and increased civic engagement in urban communities (Barker, 2010; Blumstein & Wallman, 2006; Sharkey, 2018). Yet, even during this period of relative decline, the gun homicide rate among young black men never fell below 55 per 100,000 (see Figure 3). By comparison, this is roughly equivalent to Jamaica's world-leading homicide rate of 52 per 100,000 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023). Recent years, moreover, have witnessed a dramatic reversal, as homicide rates began trending upward in the mid-2010s and have exploded since 2020. Indeed, in 2021, the rate of gun homicide among young black men reached its highest point ever, at 106.6 per 100,000. As with the preceding decline, the causes of the recent resurgence in homicide are multifaceted and debated, but likely include pandemic-related strains and disruptions, the delegitimation of law enforcement in the wake of George Floyd's killing, concomitant changes in police behavior, and the historic proliferation of firearms during a period of immense political and social unrest (Lopez, 2021; Singal, 2021). Indeed, firearms have come to play an increasingly central role in homicides, particularly among young black men: From 1979 (the earliest year for which such data is available) to 2021, the percentage of such homicides involving a firearm rose from 76% to 95%.

Figure 3. *Homicide and Gun Homicide Among Black Males Ages 15–44, 1979–2021*

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a, 2020b.

Gun Suicide in the Hollowed-Out Heartland

Spurred by the deep recession of the mid-1970s and Jimmy Carter's inability to stabilize the economy, Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 ushered in what came to be known as the "neoliberal revolution" in American political, economic, and social life. This revolution has been defined by a frontal assault on organized labor, economic policy that

prioritizes controlling inflation over full employment, welfare retrenchment, tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, government deregulation, the privatization of public goods and services, and an ideological commitment to entrepreneurialism and markets (Harvey, 2005). These features have become durable political orthodoxies over the last four decades, embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm by both Democrats and Republicans, and inequality has intensified steadily since the close of the 1970s: The top 1% of earners have doubled their pre-tax share of national income to 19%, while the top 0.1% have tripled their share of national wealth to 18% (Saez & Zucman, 2020).

The hollowing out of the American heartland over the last three to four decades has been facilitated by these transformations, as the balance of class power has shifted decisively toward capital and as the market economy has assumed an increasingly global character (Harvey, 2001, 2005). The effects of these developments have been felt throughout society, and processes of abandonment strikingly similar to those that gutted black urban working-class communities beginning in the 1960s have decimated white working-class communities in smaller cities, towns, and rural regions in the decades since the 1980s. Unionized employment in extractive industries like mining and timber declined as jobs were mechanized, new technologies rendered extractive resources redundant, and operations were offshored; mines, smelters, sawmills, and other centers of small-town industry were shuttered, from the coalfields of Appalachia to the copper mines of Butte, Montana, to the forests of the Pacific Northwest (Lee et al., 1990; Leech, 2018; Zipper & Skousen, 2021). Historically, these locales had been hotbeds of militant labor unionism; today, they are largely jobless regions facing vast health and ecological crises (Hamby, 2020; Marcus, 2000). In rural areas, the corporatization of agriculture has had a similar effect, displacing smaller farming operations, which are unable to compete with industrial-scale agribusiness, and putting hundreds of thousands of independent farmers out of business (Clapp & Isakson, 2018). These dynamics have been fueled by intensifying financialization, as private equity firms have looked toward small-town and rural America for investment opportunities, and prioritization has shifted to short-term profits, as opposed to long-term solvency and community wellbeing (Alexander, 2017; Edelman, 2021).

Similar processes have played out in traditional manufacturing, as industries shuttered and moved operations to the Global South where land and labor are cheaper, workers enjoy fewer rights, and environmental regulations are often nonexistent (Harvey, 2001, 2005). The share of manufacturing jobs in nonmetropolitan counties fell by half, from 20% to 11%, between 1970 and 2015, with the vast majority of this decrease taking place after 1990 (Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2021). Often, these were the same industries that had initially relocated to smaller cities, towns, and rural communities from central cities during the postwar decades (Gordon, 1977; Walker 1981; Wilson, 1987). Liberal trade agreements eliminating tariffs and other trade barriers have been central to this project, leading to the loss of millions of manufacturing jobs in the United States as well as the subordination of governments worldwide to the dictates of multinational corporations (Harvey, 2005). The offshoring of unionized jobs, the proliferation of state-level right-to-work laws, and a series of labor-hostile Supreme Court decisions have decimated labor unions and facilitated dramatic upward redistribution (Rosenfeld, 2014; McAlevey, 2016). Because of the relative overrepresentation of whites in the ranks of private-sector unions, they have felt

the effects of these developments acutely: Of the 1.8 million fewer unionized workers in the United States since the turn of the century, 93% of this decline—1.67 million—has been concentrated among white male workers (Maisano, 2021).

Within this context, small towns and rural areas have witnessed dramatic declines in population, owing to a combination of falling birth rates, massive outmigration, and increasing mortality rates (Johnson, 2022). In many locales, essential services have been gutted, infrastructure has eroded, and local institutions, including mutually owned banks, credit unions, family-owned stores and restaurants, local newspapers, medical facilities, and agricultural cooperatives, have withered and collapsed (Edelman, 2021). Physical and mental health have declined, and social and familial bonds have come unraveled for widening segments of the white working class (Case & Deaton, 2020). Alcohol and drug abuse offer temporary reprieves for many but take an enormous toll on health, mortality, and community life (Garriott, 2011; Monnat & Rigg, 2018).

Figure 4. *Gun Suicide Rate Among Black and White Males, Select Age Groups, 1999–2020*
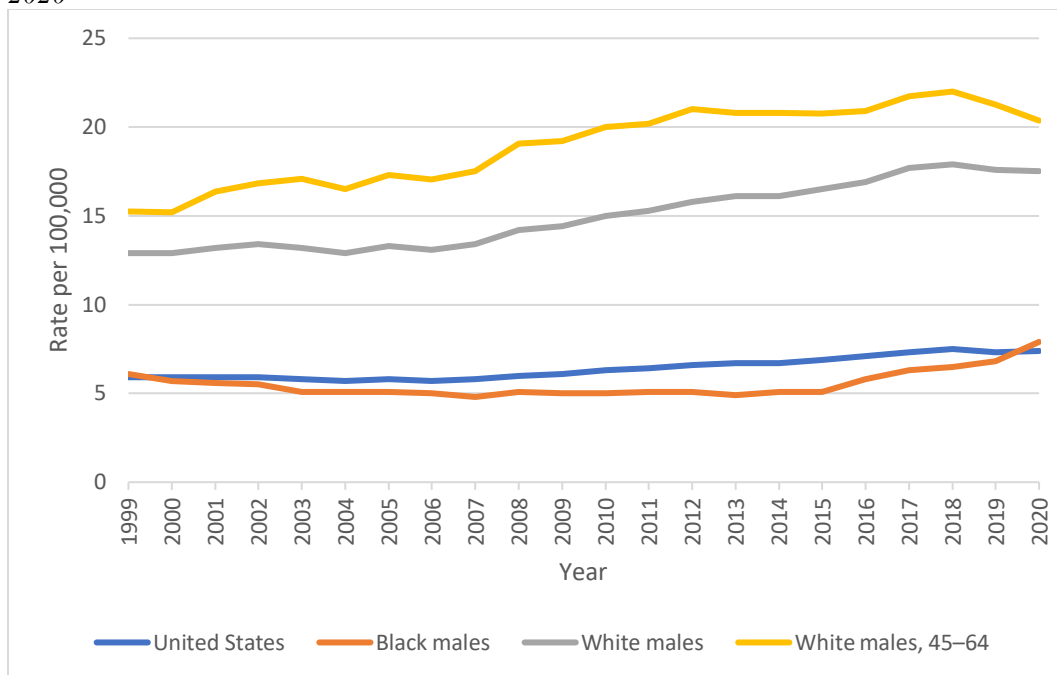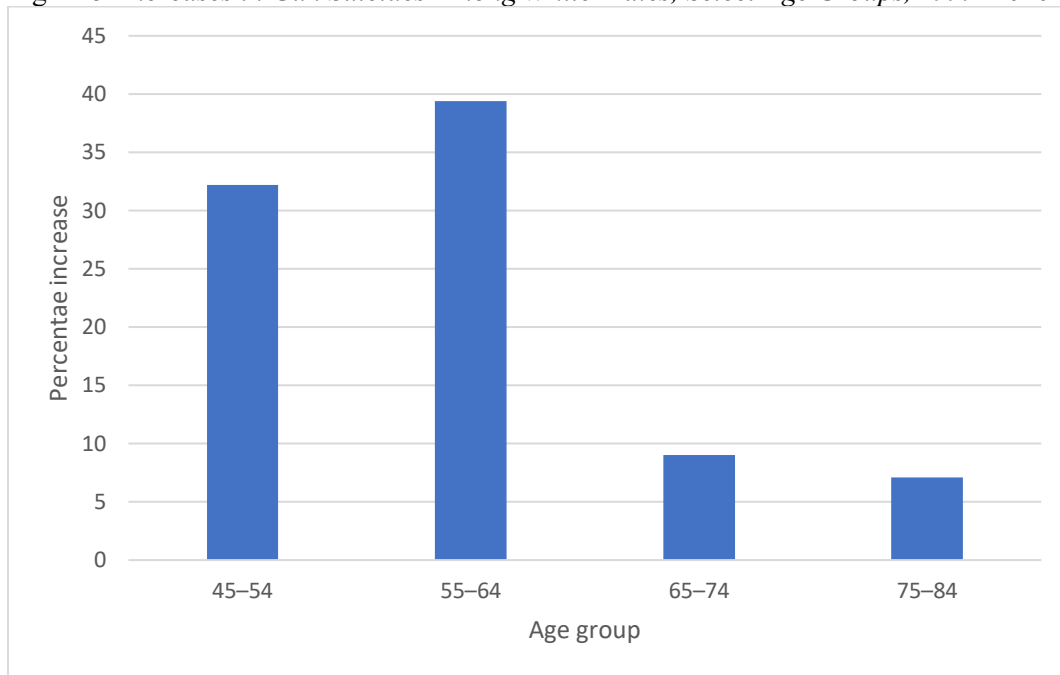

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023a.

These developments have also manifested in increased rates of gun suicide (and suicide more generally) among middle-aged white males (see Figure 4). While rates of gun suicide among white males in adolescence and early adulthood are about 20% higher than among their black counterparts, this disparity increases to 300% by early middle age and to nearly 500% by late middle age (see Figure 1b). Much of this difference among middle-aged men has come about over the last two decades, as rates of gun suicide among whites in this age group, which had been relatively stable prior to 1999, have increased between one-third

and one-half. Notably, such rates are only approximately half the rates of suicide among these populations more generally, and these latter rates have shown similar increases. These increases in suicide, as well as increases in deaths from opioid overdoses and alcoholic liver diseases, among white men over the last quarter century have been driven almost entirely by increases among the working class (Case & Deaton, 2020).

While rates of gun suicide are highest among older white men (see Figure 1b), this has been a much longer-standing issue (Mellick et al., 1992). Recent developments appear to have had little effect on suicidality among older white men; while levels of gun suicide have increased marginally among this demographic over the last quarter century, these increases have paled in comparison to those among middle-aged white men (see Figure 5). This makes sense, since changes in labor markets, job loss, and industrial abandonment are likely to have less impact on retirees than their working-age counterparts.

Figure 5. *Increases in Gun Suicides Among White Males, Select Age Groups, 1999–2020*

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023a.

Note: Percent increases were calculated by comparing average rates for the three-year periods 1999–2001 and 2018–2020.

The Colors of Despair

How might these distinctly racialized patterns of gun violence be explained? Stated differently, why is despair so much more likely to lead to gun homicide among black men and gun suicide among white men? *Racial difference* might appear as a reasonable explanation; after all, the comparison being made is between two putative racial groups. As historian Barbara Fields (1990) points out, however, as an ideology, race "does not

explain anything, but is itself part of what needs to be explained" (p. 107). Attempting to explain such differences via race's seemingly more benign counterpart, *culture*, likewise fails to resolve the conundrum: Because culture is not encoded in human DNA, its nature and development also require explanation. In short, invoking race or culture as explanations for patterns of gun violence elides how racialized subjectivities and culturally patterned behaviors emerge in the first place. As such, they are less explanations for observed patterns of gun violence than alternatives to an explanation.

A model for a more promising approach to constructing a textured and historically grounded account of racial subjectivity can be found in *Righteous Dopefiend*, a photo-ethnography of a community of homeless heroin addicts in 1990s San Francisco. During their research, authors Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg (2009) observed that black heroin users almost always injected directly into their veins, while white users often injected into muscle and fatty tissue, a practice known as "muscling" or "skin-popping." Locating a suitable vein and successfully executing a direct injection often took a great deal of time and effort and increased the risk of overdose as well as hepatitis C and HIV infection but also provided users with a distinctly euphoric high. Injecting into other bodily sites was convenient but did not produce a similarly blissful pharmacological effect and routinely led to abscesses and other infections. These divergent practices represented one manifestation of racialized patterns of both substance abuse and cultural praxis within the community, wherein blacks generally maintained a boisterous and affirming "outlaw" disposition while whites typically presented as dejected and timid "outcasts." In exploring what accounted for these distinct racial subjectivities, Bourgois and Schonberg noted that "the down-and-out way of being in the world common to most of the whites was reinforced by the absence of a culturally celebrated model for performing outlaw masculinity on the street among middle-aged white men." On the other hand, "fashionable hip-hop youth culture in the 1990s and 2000s had created a positively inflected linguistic term for over-forty-year-olds, *O.G. (Original Gangsta)*, with which African American and Latino homeless injectors could self-identify" (pp. 91-92).

The divergent racial subjectivities described by Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) constitute a productive model for exploring the racialized contours of gun violence among young black men in urban working-class communities and middle-aged white men in small-town and rural working-class communities. In this case, the roots of distinctive racial subjectivities leading to elevated levels of gun homicide among younger black men in urban areas and gun suicide among older white men in nonmetropolitan communities can be traced to the processes of mass suburbanization, urban demographic transformation, and class decomposition that took shape in the postwar decades. Following Bourgois and Schonberg (2009), we take up here the task of exploring the fashioning of these subjectivities and their manifestation in distinctly racialized patterns of gun violence.

Deaths of Despair "in Black"

Among younger black men in urban working-class communities, the manifestation of despair in gun homicide has been shaped by several factors specific to this milieu and age demographic. First, because of their size and complexity and the attendant shift beyond

primary social relations, cities consistently experience levels of interpersonal violence much higher than suburban or nonmetropolitan communities (Park & Burgess, 1925). Global studies of homicide, moreover, have found both that young men are the most likely demographic to engage in interpersonal violence and that inequality, poverty, and low levels of development are the key determinants of homicide rates the world over (Fajnzylber et al., 1999; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011). Thus, demographic shifts beginning in the late 1960s with the first wave of baby boomers coming of age, combined with rapidly deteriorating conditions in black urban communities, especially rampant joblessness among young men, created the precise conditions for interpersonal violence to proliferate in these locales.

Research on urban working-class communities of color since the 1960s has often emphasized gang wars and violent competition over drug markets as proximate causes of elevated levels of gun violence. By the late 1960s, in the wake of the collapsing urban industrial economy and civil rights insurgency, street gangs had gained a new and more durable social currency among young blacks for whom the possibility of solidarity on the shopfloor or in social movements had been foreclosed. In this context, incipient gang organizations and attendant gang wars emerged as a new kind of "cause" to which dispossessed and disaffected black youth might direct their untapped energies and talents (Davis, 1990; Diamond, 2009; Hagedorn, 2008; Schneider, 1999). The illicit drug trade, moreover, from the heroin crisis of the 1960s and 1970s to the crack cocaine crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, provided new opportunities for economic subsistence and, in some cases, considerable upward mobility for this same demographic. Unregulated by the state, control of drug markets is determined by extralegal means, and given the desperation of those vying for remunerative work in the drug trade, this has often involved violence (Bourgois, 1995; Cooley, 2011; Forman, 2017; Venkatesh, 2000).[2]

In a more general sense, gun violence emerged from more mundane social dynamics within the context of widespread joblessness and strained police-community relations. The capacity to defend oneself and one's loved ones against potential danger helped facilitate freedom of movement and access to public leisure space and became an important marker of social status, particularly among those for whom conventional success was furthest from reach (Anderson, 1990, 1999; Karandinos et al., 2014). In a similar sense, gang membership and participation in the drug economy have constituted means by which dispossessed and disaffected young people can affirm both their dignity and their agency in a society that offers them few avenues for asserting either (Bourgois, 1995; Hagedorn, 2008; Phillips, 2012). The confluence of these conditions formed the basis of the "outlaw" racialized subjectivity identified by Bourgois and Schonberg (2009), a subjectivity assumed by segments of the most dispossessed and disaffected strata of the black working class from the late 1960s onward. In other words, "gang member," "gangster," "hustler," "trapper," "driller" and similar archetypes are not byproducts of a transhistorical "black culture," much less of an ostensible racial essence (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Oliver, 2006). Rather, these racialized subjectivities and the violence they condition and give pattern to emerged and proliferated in response to the contours of life in jobless urban ghettos following deindustrialization. Understanding these phenomena in any meaningful

way requires their reinterpretation as *dependent*, not independent, variables in a historically grounded analysis.

Recent years have witnessed a dramatic decline both in conventional gang ideologies and organizations as well as in the illicit drug economy, phenomena that fueled much central-city gun violence from the late 1960s through the 1990s. The end of the crack cocaine crisis and the spread of cell phones have laid waste to the once-booming illicit drug economy in distressed working-class communities of color, alternately diminishing and decentralizing the drug trade (Bowser et al., 2017; Edlund & Machado, 2019). For this and several other reasons, broad-based gang alliances and cross-neighborhood gang organizations have fragmented (Aspholm, 2020; Phillips, 2012). Thus, neither ideological gang wars nor competition over open-air drug markets is a major factor in lethal gun violence among young black men today. Rather, this violence is increasingly fueled by the *foreclosure* of these outlets for the talents and aspirations of dispossessed black youth. As the ideologies and structures of once-powerful street gangs have shattered and the economic opportunities of the drug trade have disappeared, a new despair has emerged with the recognition that avenues for economic security, social mobility, and a dignified sense of self have been ruptured not only via conventional channels but via illicit ones as well. In this context, the solidarity expressed through collective violence and the esteem that derives from participation therein have emerged as alternative wellsprings of meaning and purpose for desperate black youth (Aspholm, 2022).

In this sense, the decline of traditional gang hostilities and drug-related violence reveals the more fundamental reality that gun violence among young black men is fueled by structurally imposed despair. Thus, while gang wars and the drug trade may have been proximate causes of gun violence and may have even produced independent effects on levels of such violence among black men in previous decades, neither has ever been adequate as an explanation for gun violence. The salience of these proximate causes is best understood against the backdrop of structural joblessness and widespread poverty within black urban working-class communities. Killings related to these dynamics, in other words, constitute deaths of despair in their own right.

Deaths of Despair "in White"

Unlike homicide, suicide is readily apprehended as a manifestation of despair: An individual has concluded that life is no longer worth living and death is preferable. Yet, ever since Emile Durkheim's (1897/1951) seminal *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, we also know that suicide is a sociological phenomenon that cannot be understood outside the societal and communal contexts in which it takes place. For example, owing to a range of factors, including lower levels of social integration, less access to mental health services, and greater access to firearms, levels of suicide are consistently higher in rural areas than in urban areas (Casant & Helbich, 2022). Moreover, research in countries throughout the world, including the United States, has found that rates of suicide increase along with socioeconomic precarity and macroeconomic downturns. This includes higher levels of suicide among the unemployed, those with lower incomes, those in lower-skilled occupations, males with lower levels of education, and renters, as well as increases in

suicide rates tied to rising levels of unemployment, economic contraction, and periods of recession (Gunnell & Chang, 2016; Platt, 2016). Many of these trends have also sharpened in recent decades, as social class and rurality have become stronger predictors of suicide (Pettrone & Curtin, 2020; Platt, 2016; Singh & Siahpush, 2002). In all cases, these trends are much stronger among men than women (Gunnell & Chang, 2016). Given the consistent linkages between socioeconomic dislocation and suicide, the discussion of the hollowing out of the heartland provides the interpretive key for recent increases in suicide among middle-aged white working-class men over the last quarter century.

Studies of life in distressed small-town and rural communities shed additional light on this phenomenon and its relation to racialized subjectivity. Though preceding the contemporary uptick in suicidality among white workers, research in rural communities in the wake of the farm crisis of the 1980s offers an illuminating case in point. Following a boom in commercial agriculture in the 1970s fueled by the opening of agricultural trade with the Soviet Union and historically low interest rates, private and public institutions flooded the sector with cheap credit, and family farming operations expanded. The early 1980s saw a reversal in trends, as trade with the Soviet Union was suspended, markets for agricultural goods contracted, interest rates soared, and land values declined (Dudley, 2000). This downturn caused widespread debt and displacement among family farmers: Farm assets nationwide depreciated by 30% between 1981 and 1987, and by 50% in the Corn Belt and Great Lakes regions; farm equity fell by more than a quarter; more than one-fifth of farms were deemed vulnerable or marginally solvent; foreclosures swept through the heartland (Barnett, 2000). In this context, suicide among struggling and displaced male farmers skyrocketed in places like rural Minnesota and Oklahoma. The rugged individualism promoted by family farming—in contrast with the solidarity of urban industrial shopfloors—encouraged the internalization of financial stress and failure within farming communities that, beyond the objective distress of such circumstances, contributed to elevated suicide rates (Dudley, 2000; Ramírez-Ferrero, 2005). More recent research indicates that farmers confronting increasing precarity not only face mounting psychological distress but also lack social support that might help them through times of difficulty (Heaberlin & Shattuck, 2023).

Small towns and smaller cities ravaged by deindustrialization confront similar challenges. Solidarities rooted in the shopfloor (or mineshaft) dissolved, as such workplaces were first transformed in ways that undermined such solidarity and, eventually, the workplaces and their labor unions disappeared altogether (Dudley, 2021; Leech, 2018). Moreover, as these communities suffered massive outmigration, especially among younger generations, families became fragmented and local institutions that had sustained social life collapsed (Edelman, 2021). All these developments served to undermine social ties and increase isolation among remaining residents, in turn, contributing to suicidality, which, under such circumstances, becomes "the affective atmosphere through which precarity is known and embodied" (Dudley, 2021, p. 204). Notably, the loss of meaningful work and social integration has largely occurred among middle-aged adults, thus helping explain the increase within that population, specifically.

The racialized subjectivity of dispossessed small-town and rural working-class whites does not replicate the white urban "outcast" of Bourgois and Schonberg's (2009) study.

Nor could it, given the vastly different histories and locations of these respective populations within the political economy. While in both cases, the violence of these populations is generally, if differentially, internalized, small-town and rural whites largely retain their self-image as salt-of-the-earth Americans; they simply believe that they have somehow personally failed to live up to that archetype. As Fields explains, "We have a white working population that, by and large, expected to be taken care of, to be treated fairly, so long as they abided by the rules" (Leanza, 2016). Yet, while resurgent investor class power and the global "race to the bottom" have gutted their communities and eroded their livelihoods, these communities "don't have a language for talking about why they are angry and why they feel aggrieved.… They can't frame it in terms of a class grievance having to do with inequality. Because we don't have that language available." In the absence of a compelling account of their predicament, suicide becomes a viable option in the face of not only material hardship but the perception that such hardship was somehow self-inflicted (Dudley, 2000; Heaberlin & Shattuck, 2023; Ramírez-Ferrero, 2005). Indeed, research suggests that expectations of adversity—born from longstanding experiences of adversity—and the existence of social institutions that provide support in the face of hardship may militate against suicidality among blacks and other people of color, whereas many whites lack both this disposition and access to such supports (Early & Akers, 1993; Oquendo et al., 2001).

In the end, nothing inherent in "whiteness," or in some ostensibly durable "white culture," necessarily translates into heightened gun suicide rates among middle-aged white men. Like patterns of gun homicide among young urban black men, these patterns must be explained historically without reliance on reified ideological constructs.

Indeed, in this sense, it is also worth noting that, prior to the mass postwar suburbanization of whites and concomitant urbanization of blacks, the vast majority of gang members as well as perpetrators and victims of urban homicide (firearm-related and otherwise) were white (Diamond, 2009; Schneider, 1999; Thrasher, 1927).[3] These realities were fueled by conditions in urban slums similar to, though less extreme than, those confronting blacks in the post–civil rights era hyperghetto: poverty, joblessness, overcrowding, municipal neglect, and the like. They were also reflected in popular stereotypes about Irish, Italian, and other European ethnics as brutish and violent (Gardaphé, 2006; Szczypa, 2021). Postwar changes in urban demography effectively eliminated these social phenomena and rendered their archetypes obsolete in the popular imagination. While racist tropes about black criminality have certainly existed since the postbellum period, only since the 1960s have street gangs and gun homicide become primarily associated with black (and Latino) Americans—in practice as well as perception (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003; Johnson, 2023; Schneider, 1999). Transformations in the social construction of race and racialized subjectivities and their effects on patterns of gun violence, in other words, have followed transformations in the political economy, demographic geographies, and prevailing local conditions.

Implications for Social Work

Both the black urban working-class communities and their rural and small-town white counterparts described in this article might be productively understood as "sacrifice zones," places where "the marketplace rules without constraints, where human beings and the natural world are used and then discarded to maximize profit" (Hedges & Sacco, 2012, p. xi). Thriving locales once synonymous with industry, opportunity, and prosperity, from urban centers of industry to the rural heartland, have been abandoned and left to implode when doing so proved profitable for the investor class.

It is imperative to recognize that this process of profit extraction and subsequent abandonment is a hallmark of the capitalist political economy. Marx (1885/1992) initially observed and remarked on these dynamics a century and a half ago, and these practices have only intensified over the intervening period, creating vast unevenness and inequality across geographical space the world over. Geographer David Harvey (2001) refers to this structural tendency as the "spatial fix," a reference to "capitalism's insatiable [addiction-like] drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring" (p. 24). In places that have suffered such abandonment, levels of joblessness approach and often exceed 50%, from the former copper-smelting town of Anaconda, Montana, to the erstwhile auto-industry satellite of Flint, Michigan, to the one-time industrial hub of Chicago's South and West Sides (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

But this is not only a problem of geography; the U.S. economy requires mass joblessness throughout society in order to function. With a working-age population of nearly 210 million, a labor force of about 165 million, and an unemployment rate of 5% (the rate that the Federal Reserve considers "full employment"), somewhere between one quarter and one-third of all working-age Americans—some 58–68 million people—are jobless at any given time. Thus, as literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels (2011) points out, unemployment is "both a problem and a solution. It's a problem for the unemployed, who want work, a solution for employers who not only want workers but also want the cheapest ones they can get." The reserve army or labor, or relative surplus population of the unemployed, thus constitutes "not a group but a structural element" of the economy (see also Marx, 1867/1990).

Interpretations of gun homicides and suicides among scholars, social workers, and other helping professionals, and the wider public typically fail to locate the structural roots of these problems in the political economy. Accordingly, the interventions that flow from such misrecognition leave the structures that fuel these problems entirely intact. In black urban communities, gun homicides are interpreted alternately as matters of misguided policing or infectious disease–cum–cultural pathology; the solutions are thought to be improved policing or micro-level behavioral modification strategies (Aspholm, 2020). Suicidality in white small-towns and rural communities, meanwhile, is highly medicalized, and efforts to expand access to addiction and mental health treatment are cast as solutions (Dudley, 2021; Heaberlin & Shattuck, 2023).

To be certain, these interpretations and their attendant remedies are preferable to more traditional tendencies that cast these problems as simple matters of morality or personal

willpower, and such programs may help to reduce some distress in the short term. Therapeutic models like cognitive behavioral therapy, for example, have shown promise in assisting gunshot victims develop healthier responses to conflict and in treating post-traumatic stress and depression, key risk factors in suicidality (Hofmann et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2018). Culturally appropriate and community-grounded interventions geared toward helping men move away from gendered stoicism and establish supportive networks, particularly in ways that tap into and enhance existing strengths within communities, represent other fruitful frontiers of gun violence prevention practice (Fuller & Goodman, 2020; McKenzie et al., 2018). The provision of practice guidelines for social work students to speak with clients about gun safety are also important, especially considering that social workers are more likely to support gun control policies and less likely to own guns than their clients (Hodge, 2003; Logan-Greene et al., 2018). More promising still are approaches to environmental design that address ecological factors contributing to gun violence. Recent research indicates that addressing neighborhood blight, for example, may not only reduce levels of gun violence but also improve residents' perceptions of crime and safety (Branas et al., 2018). Such mezzo-level interventions recognize and address variations in private and public investment and productively move the focus of intervention from the behaviors of community members to the obligations of the state.

Recognizing that structural change to improve the lives of the most dispossessed and disaffected communities in our society often happens at a glacial pace, more immediate services and supports are, indeed, essential. As New Dealer and social worker Harry Hopkins famously quipped in response to criticism that his proposed public works program would damage the economy in the long run, "People don't eat in the long run—they eat every day."

Nonetheless, the main argument of this article is that patterns of rising gun homicides and suicides in the United States have been driven by structural shifts in the political economy from the postwar period through the current neoliberal era. As such, structural remedies are essential to their resolution. In this sense, the kinds of interventions discussed above must be recognized as post hoc remedies to structurally imposed suffering. And, to the extent that prioritizing one set of interpretations and solutions necessarily entails deprioritizing others, they aid and abet that structure by reifying it—that is, by locating the causes of and solutions to these issues in the individuals and communities victimized by societal inequality, or, at best, in the institutions tasked with responding to and managing that inequality. Recognizing gun homicides and suicides as consequences of the political-economic structure requires thinking about solutions in political-economic terms: public works programs, direct income provision, expansion of the social wage, a revitalized labor movement, comprehensive and universal healthcare, and the like. In this vein, it is worth noting that Hopkins's admonition about the necessity of addressing people's suffering straight away was not a call to ignore the structural source of that suffering; it was a call to address that structure with all due urgency.

Reconsidering strategies to address the current political-economic crisis in our country will have implications for how we educate social work students to interpret and respond to the structural issues giving rise to social maladies such as homicide and suicide. While

social work's person-in-environment orientation represents a promising point of departure for interpreting how social problems are embedded in and produced by the social structure, dominant accounts tend to fall short of this ideal, failing to adequately link these problems to the wider structural features of society (Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). Social work courses encourage students to direct attention toward individuals and communities experiencing the deleterious consequences of the political-economic structure and away from the structure itself, whose interrogation would raise broader questions about the effects of fundamental features and contradictions of an advanced capitalist economy. The predictable result is training practitioners to address structural problems via individual solutions (Fenton, 2019; Morley, 2019). A more robust exposition of social problems that situates them more firmly within the political economy and the social structure it creates and reproduces would help disrupt these tendencies. At its best, such an approach would also situate domestic policy matters within a global framework that connects political economy with broader geopolitical dynamics (Hare, 2004; Putnam, 1988).

How might such approaches to social work education contribute to stimulating interest in often-marginalized practice modalities in areas like community organizing, political advocacy, and social policy? How might they spark the development of new approaches to practice? How does structurally imposed despair manifest in other demographic groups, including women, Latinx populations, Native Americans, Asian Americans, immigrant communities, and queer populations? How might social workers engage these communities in organizing across demography and geography to address people's felt needs at the structural level? What role might popular political education and engagement play in linking and mobilizing such diverse communities and perhaps even functioning as a discrete protective factor against social maladies like gun homicide and suicide? How can social workers continue to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable populations at the micro level while simultaneously challenging the prevailing political-economic structure at the macro level? These are the kinds of questions that social work practitioners, educators, and researchers might productively take up—or, in some cases, continue to explore—moving forward.

In the end, the meaningful resolution of the ongoing crises of gun homicide among young black men in dispossessed urban communities and gun suicide among middle-aged white men in dispossessed small-town and rural communities cannot occur at the micro or mezzo level. Thinking about these issues in political-economic terms allows us not only to connect the respective plights of these communities—whose problems and interests are typically regarded as distinct, if not antagonistic—but to connect their potential resolutions as well. Clarity on these matters among practitioners, scholars, and educators is paramount to social work's capacity to confront these issues in all such professional domains.

Conclusion

This article connects trends in gun homicides and gun suicides by applying and elaborating the "deaths of despair" concept to link the impact of political-economic transformations in black urban working-class communities beginning in the 1960s and in white small-town and rural working-class communities since the 1980s. In doing so, we

present an analysis that encourages an understanding of gun homicides among young black men as a manifestation of structurally imposed despair similar to suicide among middle-aged white men. The focus on divergent manifestations of gun violence among black and white men should not be interpreted to suggest that these issues are not pertinent to other racialized or gendered populations. Rather, this is an attempt to link these issues among populations for which differences rather than similarities are typically stressed in both social science research as well as public discourse. It is our hope that the similarities in deaths of despair among blacks and whites discussed in this article encourage a recognition of their common political-economic roots in social work education and contribute to an emphasis on political-economic solutions to these problems in practice.

Notes

1. The homicide rates among whites reported in these figures are likely artificially inflated, and the rates among blacks are likely artificially depressed due to how these demographics were constructed in the data set. "White" includes Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans, groups that today are generally recognized as Hispanics or Latinos and as distinct from non-Hispanic whites. With higher rates of poverty and urbanicity, these groups likely experienced higher levels of homicide than their white counterparts. On the other hand, rates reported for black men in this figure are, in the data, reported as "all other" and include not only blacks, but also American Indians, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans, groups with lower rates of homicide than blacks. Nonetheless, blacks comprised 89% of this demographic group, making it a reasonable, if imperfect, proxy for this group (Klebba, 1975).

2. Moreover, because gun homicides tend to occur within the context of groups—street gangs, neighborhood crews, drug organizations—such incidents have a propensity to fuel further violence; gun homicides, in short, tend to fuel additional homicides (Papachristos et al., 2013; Papachristos & Wildeman, 2014). In contrast, suicide, a quintessentially solitary act, lacks this collective feature. This difference, along with more widespread dispossession within black urban communities, as compared to their white rural counterparts, explain the higher rates of homicide among black men as compared to suicide rates among white men.

3. *Gordon Parks: The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957* (Meister, 2020) offers a stunning photographic depiction of multiracial criminality on the historical precipice of vast urban demographic transformation.

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