

Racial Discrepancies in Homicide Victimization and Executions in North Carolina, 1976-2008

Frank R. Baumgartner
Richard J. Richardson Professor of Political Science
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Frankb@unc.edu

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Being a victim of homicide is heavily dependent on race, gender, and age. Young black males have extremely high rates of homicide victimization as compared to other categories. The death penalty is used, however, very rarely in those cases where the victim is a black male. The data below demonstrate stark disparities in the use of the death penalty depending on the race and gender of the victim. Data cover the period of the modern death penalty, 1976 through the end of 2008.

Homicide Victimization Rates

From 1976 through 2008, 19,591 North Carolinians have been the victims of homicides, almost 600 per year on average. Of these, about three-quarters are male, and 54 percent are African-American.¹ Table 1 shows the number of homicide victims by race and gender.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

The table shows that fully 42 percent of homicide victims in North Carolina since 1976 have been black males; 29 percent, white males; 14 percent, white females, 10 percent, black females, and 10 percent, persons of other or unknown race or gender. The killers of these different categories of victims have greatly varying chances of being executed for their crimes.

Executions

North Carolina has executed 43 individuals in the modern era (since 1976). Together, they had a total of 56 victims. Table 2 shows the characteristics of those 56 individuals whose killers were executed.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

William Q. Jones, a black male, was convicted in Wake County in 1987 for the killing of Edward Peebles, also a black male, and was executed on August 22, 2003. He is the only person to have been executed for killing a single black male in North Carolina. Earl Richmond, also a black male, was executed in 2005 for the triple murders of Helisa, Darien, and Philip Hayes, one of whom was a black male. These are the only people to have been executed for the crime of homicide where the victim was a black male. Table 2 shows that while black males constitute 42 percent of the victims of homicides, they are just 4 percent of the victims of those who were

¹ In the 2000 US Census, blacks were 21.6 percent of the North Carolina population.

later executed. White females, by contrast, represent 13 percent of the overall victims, but 43 percent of those for whom the murderer was in turn put to death.

Table 3 combines the information from Tables 1 and 2 to show the dramatic differences in the rates of executions for those who kill different types of victims.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

The killers of 56 homicide victims have been executed in North Carolina since 1976, whereas 19,517 homicides have occurred. The rate of execution is therefore $56 / 19,517$ or 2.87 per 1,000, or less than 0.3 percent. First of all, we should note what a minute proportion of all murders are punished by execution. Second, however, the disparities apparent in the table are truly remarkable. Black men are by far the largest category of victims of homicides, but the killing of white women has more than 40 times more likelihood of leading to an execution than does the killing of a black man.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the data presented above.

(Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here)

Historical Trends

Are the racial tendencies in the application of North Carolina's death penalty new, or do they reflect long-standing patterns? In order to address this question we can compare rates of execution over time for white and black defendants. Figures 3 and 4 present these data (calculated from Espy and Smylka 2004).

(Insert Figures 3 and 4 about here)

Figure 3 shows the entire historical record of the annual number of executions since 1720, and Figure 4 shows only the 20th century. Whether we look at the entire historical record or only the most recent period, we see that over 70 percent of those executed have been African-Americans and that this number has commonly been 100 percent: the death penalty has often been *exclusively* reserved for African-Americans, if we look at any single year.

North Carolina passed the Racial Justice Act in 2009, allowing those condemned to death to present statistical evidence suggesting that race may have played a factor in patterns of sentencing in the state or in their judicial jurisdiction. The simple presentation of various official statistics that I have compiled here suggests that there has indeed been a long-standing connection between race and the death penalty, in particular when we consider the racial status of the victim of the crime. The bulk of homicides in North Carolina affect African-American men (especially young men). The likelihood of being executed for those crimes is 40 times lower, however, than for the killing of a white woman.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution states that “no state shall ... deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

Table 1. Homicide Victimization Rates in North Carolina.

Year	Total	Gender			Race			Race or Gender					
		Male	Female	Unknown	White	Black	Other Races	White Male	Black Male	White Female	Black Female	Other or Unknown	
1976	609	465	142	2	222	370	15	2	174	278	48	92	17
1977	586	435	151	0	257	304	25	0	196	223	61	82	25
1978	600	446	144	9	276	306	8	9	199	242	78	65	17
1979	600	468	132	0	280	310	10	0	208	252	72	58	10
1980	619	483	136	0	281	327	11	0	206	268	75	59	11
1981	541	402	139	0	249	276	16	0	176	212	72	64	16
1982	545	401	144	0	243	288	14	0	167	224	76	64	14
1983	490	362	128	0	219	257	12	2	159	195	60	62	14
1984	539	405	133	1	245	277	14	3	184	209	61	68	17
1985	520	383	137	0	248	254	18	0	176	193	71	61	18
1986	515	391	124	0	228	266	19	2	168	208	60	57	22
1987	519	374	145	0	239	268	11	0	169	196	70	72	11
1988	510	374	136	0	231	266	12	0	167	195	65	72	12
1989	584	431	153	0	242	327	10	5	167	253	75	73	15
1990	711	548	163	0	278	405	24	4	204	325	74	80	28
1991	769	603	165	1	314	438	15	2	227	363	86	75	18
1992	723	534	189	0	272	433	18	0	191	332	81	100	18
1993	785	589	197	0	287	484	13	1	194	383	93	101	14
1994	772	570	201	1	295	455	18	4	210	344	85	111	22
1995	677	518	158	1	259	382	28	7	174	319	86	64	35
1996	619	466	150	3	248	352	17	2	182	267	63	86	21
1997	614	458	155	1	265	319	26	4	185	251	80	68	30
1998	612	463	149	0	255	337	15	5	187	262	69	75	20
1999	536	395	136	5	215	292	29	0	152	220	62	72	30
2000	551	422	128	1	231	295	25	0	164	239	67	56	25
2001	517	392	122	3	237	249	31	0	166	204	71	45	31

2002	543	396	147	0	239	275	29	0	157	219	82	56	29
2003	503	382	119	2	207	270	26	0	141	222	66	48	26
2004	503	380	121	2	213	254	36	0	149	202	64	52	36
2005	582	446	136	0	258	294	30	0	177	242	81	52	30
2006	534	384	130	20	216	293	25	0	138	227	68	57	44
2007	592	452	138	2	240	327	25	0	167	269	73	58	25
2008	597	429	168	0	267	296	34	0	172	234	95	62	34
Totals	19,517	14,646	4,816	55	8,254	10,547	663	53	5,851	8,271	2,388	2,267	739
Percent	100.00	75.04	24.68	0.28	42.29	54.04	3.40	0.27	29.98	42.38	12.24	11.62	3.79

Notes: Data from 1976 through 1999 come from Fox 2001. From 2000 through 2008 they come from the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (<http://sbi2.jus.state.nc.us/crp/public/Default.htm>) accessed in January 2010. Numbers from both sources were available for 1999. The North Carolina numbers were approximately 3 percent lower than the Fox (US Department of Justice) numbers over all, with no discernible differences in relative ratios by race or gender.

Table 2. Race and Gender of North Carolina Murder Victims, by Execution Status.

Victim Characteristics	All Murder Victims		Victims of Persons Executed	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Black Male	8,271	42	2	4
White Male	5,852	29	20	36
White Female	2,388	13	24	43
Black Female	2,267	10	8	14
Other or Unknown	739	5	2	4
Total	19,517	100	56	100

Note: Information about executions was downloaded from the NC Department of Corrections web site on March 19, 2010: <http://www.doc.state.nc.us/dop/deathpenalty/executed.htm>.

Table 3. Execution Rates per 1,000 Murders, by Victim Characteristics

Victim Characteristics	All Murder Victims	Victims of Persons Executed	Execution Rate per 1,000 Homicides
White Female	2,388	24	10.05
Black Female	2,267	8	3.53
White Male	5,852	20	3.42
Other or Unknown	739	2	2.71
Black Male	8,271	2	0.24
Total	19,517	56	2.87

Figure 1. Race and Gender of Homicide Victims

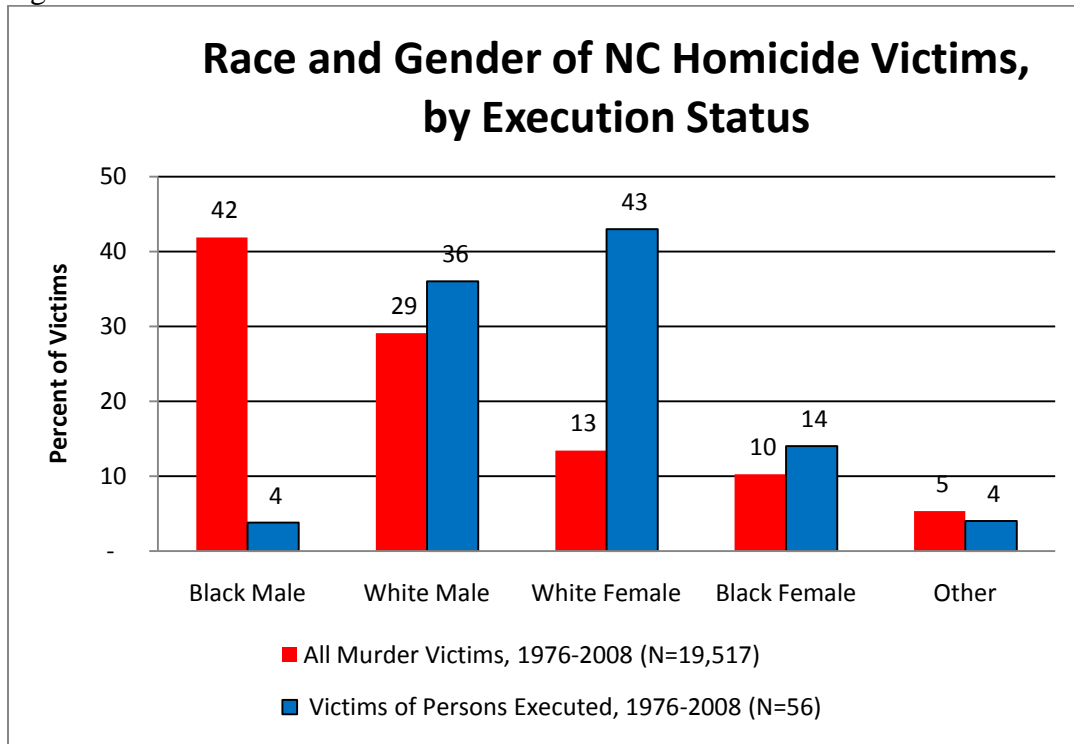


Figure 2. Execution Rates by Race and Gender of the Victim.

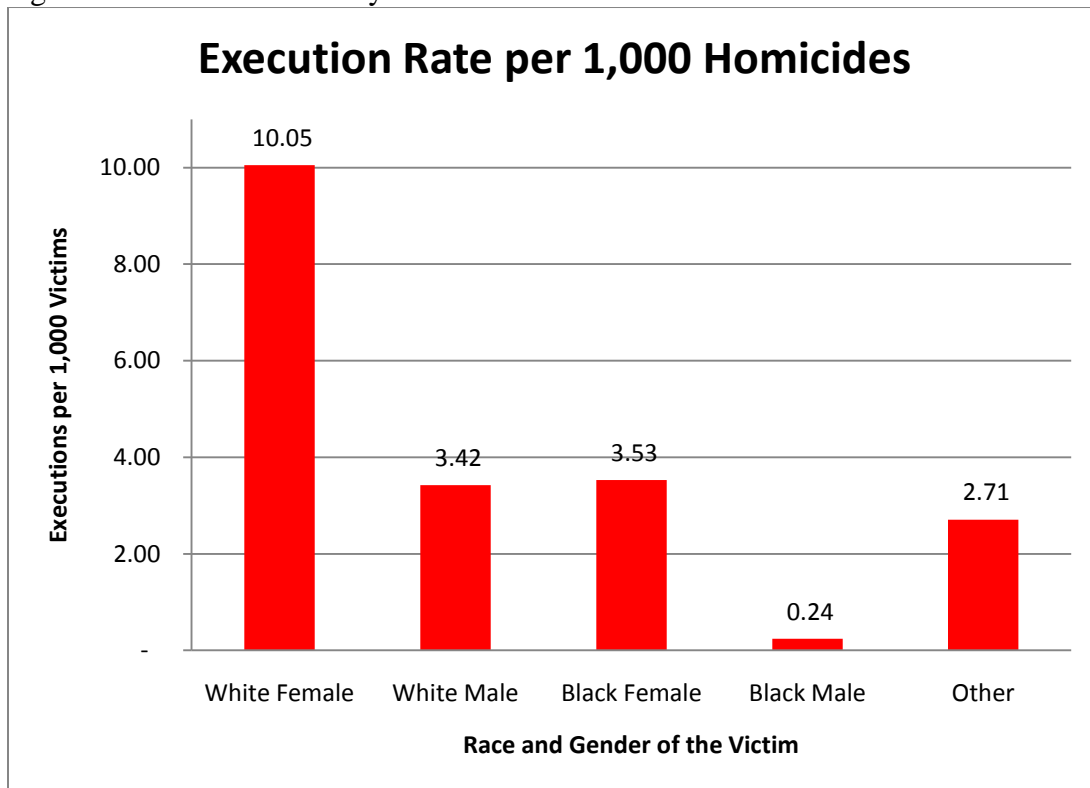


Figure 3. Numbers and Percent Black of North Carolina Executions, 1700 to 2002.

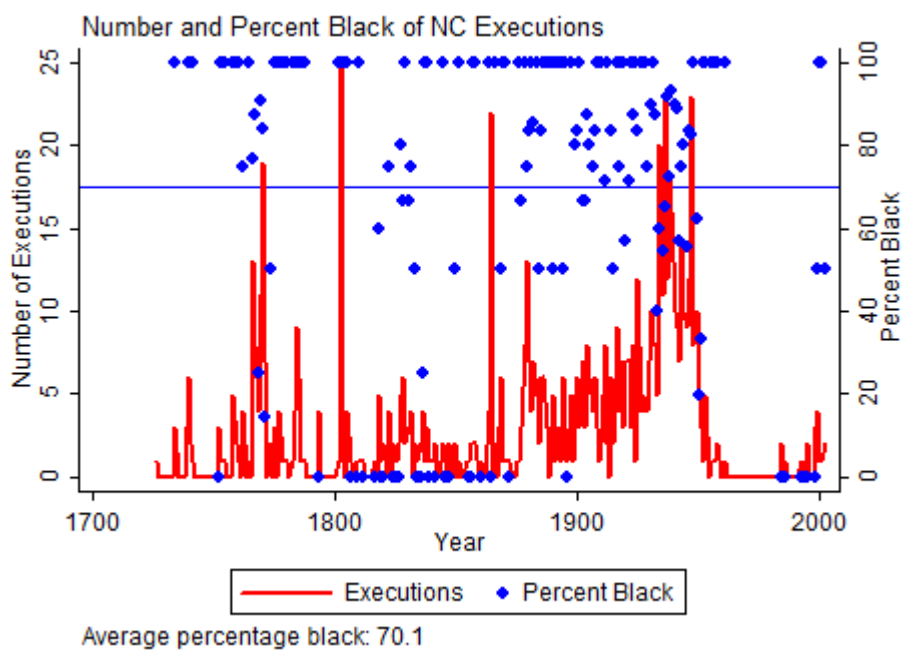
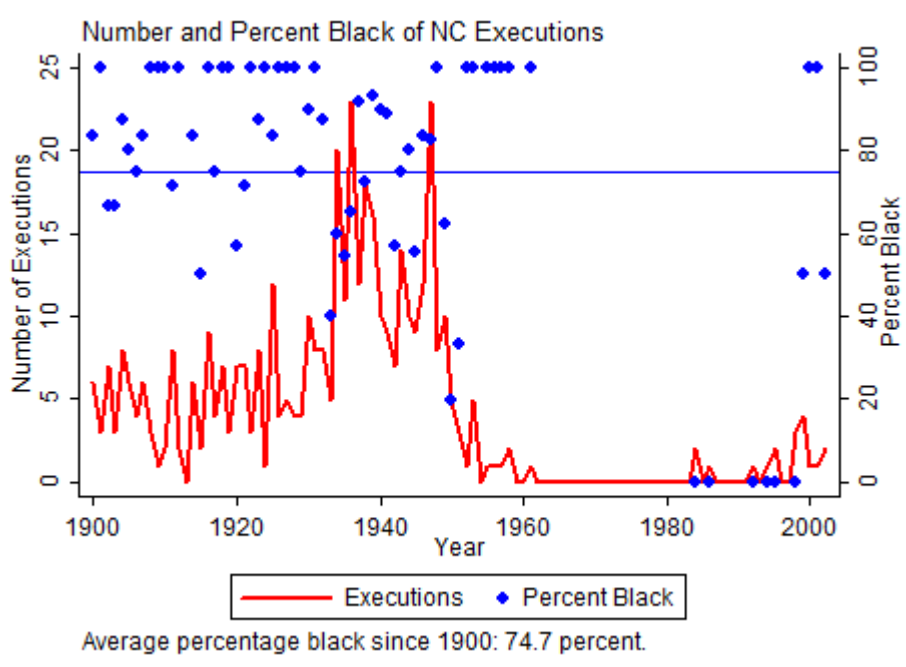


Figure 4. Numbers and Percent Black of North Carolina Executions, 1900 to 2002.



References

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