

Book Review

Currie, E. (2020). [*A peculiar indifference: The neglected toll of violence on Black America*](#). MacMillan.

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Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 18, Number 1 (2021)
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Imagine living in a world where violence is always present in your own home or right next door and the noise of gunshots provides a continuing reminder that violence is “an essentially uncontrollable fact of life” (p. 57). W.E.B. Du Bois provided the inspiration for the title of Currie’s work by writing that there is notable avoidance about the need to address violence in the African American community (p.16). *A Peculiar Indifference* is an incredible work for those involved in social justice causes or who are enraged when watching news reports of fellow Americans who are entrusted to uphold the “law” and kill fellow Americans (who are mostly unarmed, often are experiencing mental illness, are poor, and are more often than not from the Black community) (p.8). Currie combines an overview of years of social research grounded in a myriad of public health, criminology and psychology and contextualized through the eyes of literary scholars such as Du Bois who studied and wrote about life in Black America throughout the 20th century. Currie maintains that writers such as Du Bois, Myrdal, and Clark have similar thinking in that, “all of them acknowledged the seriousness of the problem of violence in the black communities [sic] but also firmly connected it to the destructive impact of the specific history of racial oppression in America—a uniquely severe system of economic and political disadvantage that has inflicted pervasive harm on community life and personality” (p.13).

Using a growing body of research on violence in Black communities, Currie analyzes the development of “structural disadvantages.” Currie

breaks down precisely what the term structural disadvantages in these communities looks like on several different dimensions, including the larger political systems of the United States, the smaller dimensions of community systems, and the smaller but equally important dimension of the behavior of the individual within the system (p.9). Currie is a master at highlighting research that demonstrates the connection between poverty, marginalization, neglect, and the suffering that these structural disadvantages create for a majority of African Americans in these communities. Currie points out the racial and economic roots of racial violence and disparities and connects the dots between the continual stress of violence, poor health, and disability as highlighted in community research. Currie not only discusses racial disparities with regard to the political and economic aspects, but he also discusses the excessive use of guns in these communities and how guns and violence have become a rite of passage for young Black men whom he maintains have normalized violent behavior. Currie maintains that, “many who are killed begin the fast journey to death by using violence as a response to stressors” (p.5).

Of particular interest was Currie’s discussion of James Garbarino’s work from the 1980s in a Chicago public housing development focused on restrictions that mothers placed on their children as a result of living in a dangerous neighborhood. In addition to keeping their children from playing outside, mothers developed a very “punitive style of discipline (including physical assault) in an

effort to keep the child from falling under negative influences” (p.52). Currie goes on to explain that the mothers in this study used physical assault on the children and insisted that it was used as a way of teaching their children survival - to be tough in a very tough world. As a former mitigation specialist and investigator for the Federal Public Defender Capital Habeas Unit (CHU), I witnessed this kind of parenting as reported by several mothers of clients who were sentenced to death row. One particular case comes to mind of a young man who turned to the gang as a young teen to help support his family. This young man was also engaging in the gang as a part of his normal day-to-day life and identity and was highly aggressive, much like the children in Ng-Mak’s study (p.67). The young man’s parents insisted that they loved their son very much but also engaged in corporal punishment toward him throughout his life. Of particular interest in this investigation was the numerous times the client was taken to the emergency room as a young teen—at least three times during one year for broken bones that the youth claimed happened accidentally at school.

The research covered in this work is outstanding and helps to breakdown statistics to highlight the epidemic of violence in the African American community caused by a long history of economic and political injustice. Currie makes it abundantly clear that there is a solution to the “systematic racial inequalities” (p.7) that have plagued communities and served to perpetuate racial inequalities. Solutions to these issues include investing resources in the criminal justice system, reviewing the records of older prisoners who pose no threat to the community and releasing them, and public investment in social programs, among others (p.213). Currie admits that these are not new ideas, but as research has shown, interventions within each dimension or system in tandem with one another presents the most promising ameliorations of the epidemic of violence.

Currie helps us better understand issues facing many African American communities and is relentless regarding the research pointing to the historic marginalization, which has been created by American institutions as a form of social control. I am recommending this book as required reading in our MSW program’s Family and Community Violence course. Numerous and important studies highlighted in this work in context of the works of prolific literary scholars on the topic are invaluable to social workers in every aspect of social work.

Currie discusses the “racial invariance” thesis that indicates if White people lived under the same structural conditions as Black people, they would experience the same level of violence. The trouble, as outlined by Currie is that Black and White people are “almost never in the same structural conditions” and that we need a “highly deprived white [sic] community as compared with a highly deprived black [sic] one. (p. 146). Currie talks about the “near impossibility” of finding a comparable White community—to which I automatically thought of “Appalachia.” Three pages later Currie discusses a study by Krivo and Peterson using a comparable sample from a White community in Columbus, Ohio. Currie talks about the White population who lives on certain tracts of land in Columbus and states “even in Columbus with its close proximity to Appalachia, one of the heartlands of white poverty in America” [sic] the white community was not as ‘dire’ or as ‘violent’ as its comparable black [sic] community (p.149). It is not an easy task for an Appalachian social worker and college teacher to review the work of a Pulitzer Prize finalist; however, even though my upbringing was in the “heartland of White poverty” I have a great appreciation for a scholar of Currie’s acumen. Currie breaks down the history of the creation of violent communities and makes excellent recommendations for working on the creation of a great Republic dreamt of in the beginning of our democracy. As Currie quotes W.E.B. Du Bois “If in the heyday of the greatest of the world’s civilizations, it is possible for one

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people...to slowly murder another by economic and social exclusion....if the consummation of such a crime be possible in the twentieth century, then our civilization is vain, and the republic is a mockery and a farce” (p.231).

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