

Project Summary:

Overview: The proposed project seeks to create a new data source on the victims of racial violence, specifically individuals who were threatened with lynching, but not killed, in a dozen Southern states across a span of 70 years (1870 – 1940). The project will locate historical census manuscript records for intended victims of “threatened” or “averted” lynchings, and create a database and case files using information on individuals and households from these documents. Records for intended victims will include standardized measures of severity of threat, and be merged with existing data on people who were lynched, as well as on nonvictim members of their communities, allowing us to identify the characteristics that put individuals at risk of various levels of victimization. The project will also marshal aggregated county-level social, demographic, economic, and political data, and incorporate spatial dynamics, to determine whether specific contextual factors placed people with particular absolute or relative characteristics at elevated risk of victimization. We will analyze the data quantitatively, and will also make available data that are suitable for both quantitative and qualitative analyses. A public web site facilitating the distribution of these data to the academic community will be developed, and will also enable research by amateur historians and surviving family members.

Intellectual Merit: While lynching is largely an historic practice, victimization based on gender, perceived sexual identity, race/ethnicity, religious adherence, and economic status continues to plague societies around the globe. This project will help reframe our understanding of the dynamics of victimization in multiple ways. The work stands to help resolve the tension between theoretical explanations for contextual factors that make inter-group predation likely, and theories that identify the individual characteristics that increase the risk of victimization. It will potentially integrate them into a synthetic theoretic perspective. The project may also reorient victimization research to allow joint analyses of both individual and community characteristics along with a measure of the severity of victimization. It will expand our understanding of the role of victim characteristics by allowing us to identify how individual traits are related to victimization itself as well as the severity of attack, once a person has been selected as a potential target of intergroup violence. This project will enable us to embed victims within their communities, facilitating analyses that examine the relationship between individual characteristics, contextual factors, and the severity of the attack, to determine whether specific environments are more dangerous for people with particular profiles.

Broader Impacts: This project will promote training and learning by incorporating graduate and undergraduate students at an urban, public university in the conduct, presentation, and publication of research. Our quantitative analyses, identifying the characteristics that predicted victimization and its severity, as well as the contextual characteristics that put individuals with particular characteristics at risk, will help us better understand contemporary bias crime and ethnic conflict. Finally, the interactive elements of the web site develop and implement a new model of incorporating broader public participation in the collection of social scientific data, allowing members of the public to conduct their own archival research and contribute to the development of our data. The publicly-available website will allow academics, amateur researchers, and genealogists to access information on lynched and intended victims, and help improve the quality of the data.