

**“Making the Unknown Known:  
Demographic Characteristics of Southern Lynch Victims,”<sup>1</sup>**

Amy Kate Bailey  
Office of Population Research  
Princeton University

Stewart E. Tolnay  
Sociology Department  
University of Washington

and E.M. Beck.  
Sociology Department  
University of Georgia

Extended abstract submitted September 2008 for the  
Population Association of America 2009 annual meetings.

---

<sup>1</sup> The project described in this article has received support from the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation [SES-0521339] and the Institute for Ethnic Studies in the United States at the University of Washington. We are grateful to Patty Glynn, Suzanne Eichenlaub, and our undergraduate research assistants for their expert help. Direct correspondence to: Amy Bailey, Office of Population Research, Wallace Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544; email: akbailey@princeton.edu.

Young black men have endured elevated risk of violent mortality for decades (Block 1975, Brearley 1930, Fox and Zawitz 2007; Preston et al. 2003). Homicide is now a leading cause of death for young black men, with most victims dying at the hands of fellow African Americans. In the past, young black men were the most frequent targets of southern lynch mobs, primarily composed of whites from their community. Although small in number, when compared to contemporary homicides, the victims of southern lynching carry special significance because their mortality reflected the broader social, economic, and cultural disadvantages faced by African Americans. The enduring cultural significance of lynching as a cause of death is evidenced by the national response to events at a Jena, Louisiana, high school (Jones 2007). More empirically, the historical prevalence of lynching has been shown to predict contemporary rates of both homicide (Messner et. al. 2005) and the enforcement of “hate crime” laws (King et al. 2008) in the South, or capital punishment nationwide (Jacobs et. al. 2005). Despite the lingering influence of what would now be considered an extreme hate crime, and the wealth of information demographers and others have uncovered regarding the contextual factors and institutional arrangements that made lynching more likely (Ames 1938, Hovland and Sears 1940, Perloff 2000, Soule 1992, Stovel 2001, Tolnay and Beck 1995, Wasserman 1998), we know very little about the people who were victimized by vigilante mobs. Given that contextual conditions in the historic South were ripe for a lynching, what demographic characteristics – other than being black and male – were risk factors for mortality at the hands of a mob? This paper will present the first substantive results from an innovative data collection effort that uses online genealogical resources to create a database of people known to have been lynched in the American South between 1882 and 1930. In this extended abstract, we first describe how we are constructing this new data source, then present preliminary descriptive results for this project and, finally, discuss the analytic strategy we plan to employ in the full paper.

## **I. Creating a New Data Source**

We begin with the Beck-Tolnay (2004) inventory, constructed two decades ago and including minimal information for 2,806 lynch victims<sup>2</sup> -- generally their name, race, gender, and the date, state and county of their lynching. By linking these victims with their census records, we glean a far broader variety of information about the people who were targeted for these hate crimes, and all members of their household: for example, age, occupation, literacy/ education, homeownership and marital status. We can then compare characteristics of lynch victims to those of random samples of the population that was not lynched and identify whether the groups varied systematically. This new information will help us create a more complete picture of the people targeted for lynching, and to refocus the study of southern mob violence on its victims.

Our creation of a new database of lynch victims is noteworthy because of our geographic and temporal scope, the variety of documents we incorporate, and the fact that our initial inventory was created using newspaper reports. Perhaps most importantly, our data collection efforts occur entirely online. Rather than scrolling through microfilm or digging through library archives, we use a genealogy website subscription<sup>3</sup> and its searchable web-based interface to access high-quality .jpg images of historic census manuscripts and other historic documents. We search for each victim in the census records immediately prior to his or her lynching – a backward search. For example, if someone was lynched in 1902, we search in the 1900 census,

---

<sup>2</sup> Note that our “searchable” sample size is somewhat smaller – 2,165 individuals. This is because names were not reported for all victims, and we have opted to exclude people who were lynched between 1896 and 1899 due to the destruction of the original 1890 census manuscripts, an issue discussed later.

<sup>3</sup> The genealogy website we use is called Ancestry.com.

beginning within the county of lynching, and expanding outward to contiguous and nearby counties. We also conduct a forward search, looking in the 1910 census for candidate matches we identified in the 1900 census, to eliminate “false-positives.” All original U.S. census manuscript records through 1930 can now be searched online using various criteria, including an individual’s name, race, age, gender, and their state and county of residence.<sup>4</sup>

While our research primarily relies on census records, we incorporate additional online sources to verify matches and to locate additional information on lynch victims. Chief among these are World War I draft registration cards, available for more than 24 million men in 1917 and 1918, and including each person’s name, race, date of birth, employer, occupation, marital status, and often next-of-kin. Unfortunately, the draft has limited temporal and age applicability, reducing the usefulness for our project. We also frequently rely on death records to verify facts about particular victims, or to adjudicate between multiple possible matches. Information about death records is often available online, although temporal and geographic coverage is uneven. Within the American South, few records exist before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and implementation of vital records registries varied both within and between states. We also utilize historical newspapers archived on Ancestry.com. Articles about lynchings sometimes include details about the victim – for example, the person’s age, occupation, or the names of family members – which can help narrow down our field of match candidates. As the number of historical newspapers online increases, and the functionality of search engines used to access them improves, we anticipate that this kind of online resource will become more useful.

This effort faces many challenges typical of historical data collection, particularly record linkage efforts. We rely on data – research notes from staff members of the Beck-Tolnay inventory –collected for a different purpose, namely to identify temporal and spatial variation in lynching prevalence. Those research notes, in turn, were based on historical newspaper reports. Historical census data also contain an unknown – but likely, a small – degree of error in that all information for a given household was reported by a single member. The specific focus of our research presents additional challenges. Perhaps most problematic is the underenumeration of African American men (Coale and Rives 1973), which was substantial in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We face an additional restriction due to the destruction of the original 1890 census manuscripts in a fire. The 1890s were the decade in which the greatest number of lynchings occurred, so we lose several hundred cases because we lack primary source documentation to locate these victims. This also reduces our confidence in matches from the 1880s, since our ability to eliminate false positives through forward matching is compromised due to the length on time that elapsed between the 1880 and 1900 censuses.

A second set of challenges lies in the distribution medium of our source data, particularly since the technology is so new it has been under development as we have been using it. Consequently, different search functionalities have evolved over the course of the project, and resources available for the final stages of our searching were not available to us earlier in the project. While Soundex searching is available,<sup>5</sup> wildcard searching is limited,<sup>6</sup> and Boolean search terms are not allowed (i.e., one cannot simultaneously search for more than one name or

---

<sup>4</sup> For additional information on the construction of this database, please see Bailey et. al., 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Soundex is a phonetic algorithm which allows for similar names to be included – i.e. a search for Johnson would yield hits for Johnsen and Jonnson

<sup>6</sup> A user interface is said to search using “wildcards” when it searches for a string of characters that may appear independently or nested within longer words. For example, a wildcard search for jon\* would identify the first names Jon and Jonathan, as well as the last name Jones.

county). Data entry for the online searchable versions of the original census enumerators' manuscripts is being done in non-English-speaking countries, some of which do not use Roman-based writing systems. This poses an additional challenge for the coders (and, therefore, us), who are attempting to decipher enumerator handwriting in order to successfully identify, translate, and enter names common in the historic American South.

## **II. Preliminary Descriptive Results**

Construction of the database involves search and match selection, as well as data entry. We have currently completed all steps for the following states: Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina, a total of 1,033 named victims and 486 matches. Additionally, we have completed data entry for all post-1900 cases in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee (383 victims and 150 successful matches), and are in process with pre-1900 data entry for these states (a total of 432 victims). Both South Carolina and Kentucky have been nearly completely searched (totaling 317 named victims), but data entry has not begun for these two states. We anticipate that the database will be fully complete by December of this year.

We have conducted preliminary analyses comparing a few of the characteristics of black men whose cases have been completed, to black men from the counties in which one or more lynchings occurred in each decade. Information on the comparison samples is obtained from the 1% sample Census PUMS files available from the Minnesota Population Center (Ruggles et. al. 2004), and the sample for each decade is constructed using all black males aged 14 through 70 who lived in a county that experienced a lynching during that decade. Our preliminary results indicate that lynch victims are significantly more likely than are members of the comparison sample to be literate in all decades. Additionally, lynch victims were more likely to be currently married and have been born out-of-state in the decades 1900 – 1909 and 1920 - 1929.

## **III. Analytic Strategy for PAA**

Once our dataset is complete, we will use descriptive statistics to identify aggregate-level differences between lynch victims and the comparison population that was not lynched. In addition to literacy, marital status, and birth state, we will examine non-agricultural employment, children's school enrollment, family home ownership, birth order, disability, and living outside a family unit – for example, as a boarder or live-in servant. We will also conduct multi-level analyses, with victims and a corresponding sample of non-victims, embedded within states and time periods. By using a particular characteristic, for example literacy, as the dependent variable and “victim status” as the key predictor variable, the multi-level approach will allow us to determine whether any observed, statistically significant differences between victims and non-victims were stable over time and across areas, or if there was temporal and/or spatial variation in the selectivity of lynch victims from the general population.

Identifying whether systematic differences obtained between lynch victims and members of the general population, and what those differences were, will help us better understand the role of lynching in suppressing the black community during the Jim Crow era. For example, one explanation suggests that more upwardly mobile, economically successful blacks were “made an example of” through lynching, to warn other blacks against challenging the prevailing racial caste system. A competing hypothesis argues that victimizing marginal members of the black community – those with few local ties or limited social status – enabled whites to terrorize local African Americans without risking retaliatory collective action. And finally, if characteristics that distinguish lynch victims from other members of their communities vary over time, or across space, we may gain additional insight into the ways in which specific local contexts influenced risk of this kind of mortality, or the terroristic role of lynching changed over time.

## CITED REFERENCES

- Ames, Jessie Daniel. 1938. "Editorial Treatment of Lynchings." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2 (1): 77 – 84.
- Bailey, Amy Kate, Stewart E. Tolnay, E.M. Beck, Alison Renee Roberts, and Nicholas H. Wong. 2008. "Personalizing Lynch Victims: A New Database to Support the Study of Southern Mob Violence." *Historical Methods* 41(1): 47 – 61.
- Beck, E. M. and Stewart E. Tolnay. 2004. "Confirmed Inventory of Southern Lynch Victims, 1882-1930." Machine-readable data file available from authors.
- Block, Richard. 1975. "Homicide in Chicago: A Nine-Year Study (1965 – 1973)." *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 66 (4): 496-510.
- Brearley, H.C. 1930. "The Negro and Homicide." *Social Forces* 9 (2): 247-253.
- Coale, Ansley J. And Norfleet W. Rives Jr. 1973. "A statistical reconstruction of the Black population of the United States 1880-1970: Estimates of true numbers by age and sex, birth rates, and total fertility." *Population Index* 39:3-36.
- Fox, James Alan and Marianne W. Zawitz. 2007. *Homicide Trends in the United States*. Published online by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, accessed 3 September 2008 from: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/ageracesex.htm>.
- Hovland, Carl I. and Robert R. Sears. 1940. "Minor Studies in Aggression: VI. Correlation of Lynching with Economic Indices." *Journal of Psychology* 9: 301-10.
- Jacobs, David., Jason T. Carmichael and Stephanie L. Kent. 2005. "Vigilantism, Current Racial Threat, and Death Sentences." *American Sociological Review* 70 (4): 656-677.
- Jones, Richard G. 2007a. "Louisiana Protest Echoes the Civil Rights Era." *New York Times*. Print edition, 21 Sept.; accessed online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/21/us/21jena.html?\\_r=1&scp=3&sq=jena,%20louisiana&st=cse&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/21/us/21jena.html?_r=1&scp=3&sq=jena,%20louisiana&st=cse&oref=slogin) on 3 Sept. 2008.
- King, Ryan D., Steven F. Messner, and Robert D. Baller. 2008. "Resisting Hate Crime Law and the Legacy of Lynching." *American Sociological Review*, in press.
- Messner, Steven F. Robert D. Baller and Matthew P. Zevenbergen. 2005. "The Legacy of Lynching and Southern Homicide." *American Sociological Review* 70 (4): 633-655.
- Perloff, Richard. 2000. "The Press and Lynchings of African Americans." *Journal of Black Studies* 30 (3): 315-330.
- Preston, Samuel H., Irma T. Elo, Mark E. Hill, and Ira Rosenwaike. 2003. *The Demography of African Americans, 1930 to 1990*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Ruggles, Steven , Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander. 2004. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3.0 [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor].
- Soule, Sarah A. 1992. "Populism and Black Lynching in Georgia, 1890 – 1900." *Social Forces* 71 (2): 431 – 499.
- Stoval, Katherine. 2001. "Local Sequential Patterns: The Structure of Lynching in the Deep South, 1882-1930." *Social Forces* 79 (3): 843-880.
- Tolnay, Stewart E. and E.M. Beck. 1995. *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882 – 1930*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Wasserman, Ira M. 1998. "Media Rhetoric and Images of Lynching in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries". *Michigan Sociological Review* 12 (68-94).