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## David Yamane: On race, victimization and gun violence

David Yamane/Guest columnist Feb 6, 2018















s a sociology professor at Wake Forest University studying American gun

culture, I can't stop thinking about Najee Baker, a 21-year-old student shot and killed on our campus recently. The intrusion of gun violence into our relatively peaceful community -- this is the first

homicide on campus in the school's 184-year history -- compels attention. But for that

attention to be productive, we need to be willing to speak openly about race,

victimization and gun violence in America. Najee Baker was a student at Winston-Salem State University attending a party at Wake Forest the night he was killed. Police have since obtained a murder warrant for 21-year-old Jakier Austin and arrested 16-year-old Malik Smith, who witnesses say

used a gun to control others gathered while Austin shot Baker. Baker, Austin and Smith are all young African-American men. This fact has been an elephant in the room in my discussions of the event with members of the Wake Forest and broader Winston-Salem communities. People are also reading...

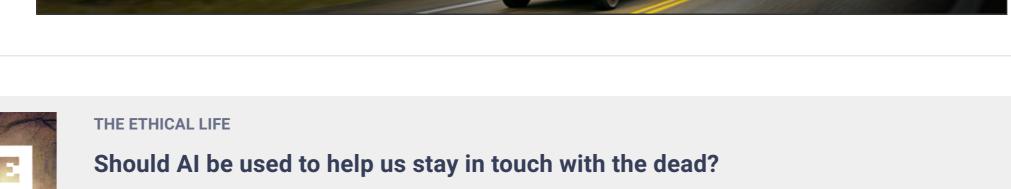
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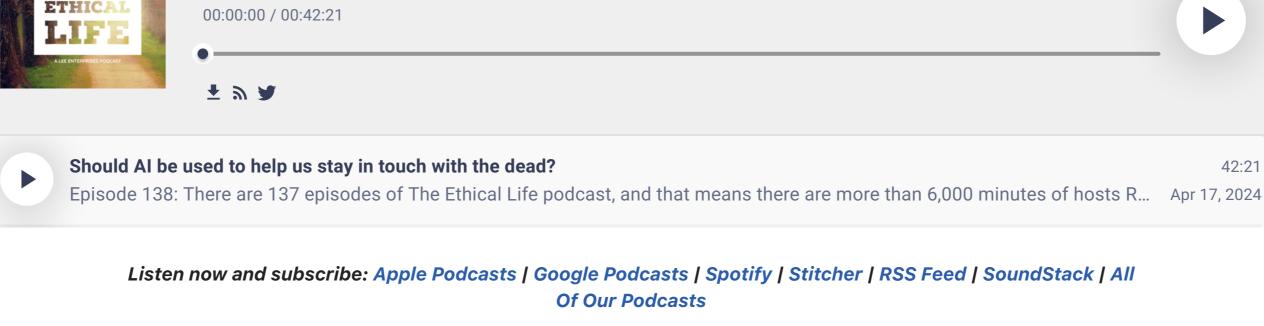
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Simply naming the elephant "race," however, can obscure more than it enlightens.

Many people incorrectly invoke the idea of "black-on-black" crime to explain events like this. The problem with this explanation is that most killers target people who are like themselves -- those who live around them, co-workers, intimate partners. Almost all whites are killed by other whites, though we rarely speak of "white-on-white" crime.





The racial elephant we should be speaking openly about is how, akin to other health disparities like infant mortality and tuberculosis, rates of criminal gun violence are

particularly high among African-Americans. In a country with vast economic inequality -- which is correlated with homicide -- overlaid with profound racial segregation, this is not surprising. One of the awful truths reflected in the case of Najee Baker is that homicide is the leading cause of death of African-American males from 15-to-34 years of age. Some express little sympathy for these demographic facts because "it's just criminals killing other criminals." But all available evidence suggests that Najee Baker was an

African-American men as innocent victims of violence. Even more taxing on our imaginations is the reality that the communities in which such violence is rampant are victimized, too. Published recently, sociologist Patrick Sharkey's book Uneasy Peace discusses the pernicious indirect effects of community

violence on the daily lives of residents, and particularly the educational achievement

innocent victim. Sadly, our social stereotypes make it hard for some to imagine young

of schoolchildren who are neither perpetrators nor immediate victims of that violence.

me, then, the ultimate elephant in the room is not race per se. It is the profound economic and racial inequality that exists all around us, and the many victims it claims, directly and indirectly. It is the reality that what exists just blocks away from our campus feels like a world apart. It is a reality that allows me to characterize the killing of Najee Baker on our campus as an intrusion. David Yamane is a professor of Sociology at Wake Forest University. The opinion expressed here is solely his and does not reflect the official perspective of the university.

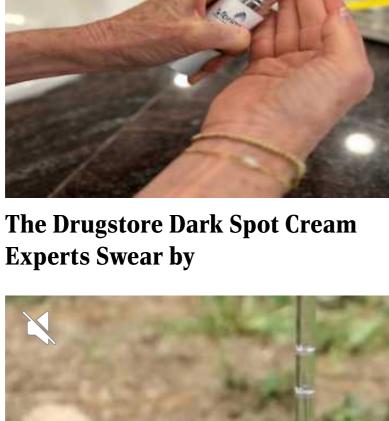
The same segregation that helps create the conditions for criminal violence in areas of

concentrated disadvantage also ensure that most violent victimization takes place out

of the view of those of us who live and work in the areas of concentrated privilege. For

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