

CRIME AND THE BLACK POPULATION OF BRITAIN

The following article was written in 1978 by Dave Drew and Tony Bendell. It is the first draft of what was to have been a chapter of the forthcoming book by the Race Group (in conjunction with the Runnymede Trust) entitled "Britain's Black Population" (Heinemann, October 1980, £4.95). This chapter was never completed because Tony Bendell left the group when he left Sheffield, and no one was willing to take on the extra work.

Despite the two years that have elapsed, the comments on arrests for 'sus' and on unemployment are timely, if not more so, today than at the time when the article was written. The article needs to be brought up-to-date, however, and it is proposed that this should be done in the near future, with a view to circulating it more widely. If you are interested in helping with this, please get in touch with Dave Drew, Department of Maths and Stats, Sheffield City Poly, Pond Street, Sheffield S1 1WB; telephone 0742 20911 ext 397.

The Select Committee on Race and Immigration in 1972 pronounced "The conclusions remain beyond doubt: coloured immigrants are no more involved in crime than others; nor are they generally more concerned in violence, prostitution and drugs. The West Indian crime rates are much the same as that of the indigenous population. The Asian crime rate is much lower." ref (8)

Although these conclusions are quite emphatic, the subject of race and crime has, in this country been little researched. Furthermore, the researcher is thwarted by the lack of official statistics and there are problems surrounding the interpretation of crime statistics even where they are available.

Problems in the Interpretation of Crime Statistics.

Problem in the interpretation of crime statistics are discussed by Bottoms and Wiles in a paper reviewing research on race and crime on both sides of the Atlantic. Statistics on arrests do not give an accurate enumeration of all those acts committed which are legally defined as criminal since not all criminal acts are observed, or reported, recognised or recorded. In other words some people get arrested and other people "get away with it". Bottoms and Wiles suggest that a kind of differential may operate in the way the legal process works in respect of minorities. They say "we do have evidence that systems of law enforcement are sometimes racially prejudiced. This means, to put it starkly, that a racist society will produce a racist official picture of crime. Depending on the nature of the racism, this may show the official figures either to over- or under- represent the particular group in question."

Official Sources: Availability of Statistics.

There is generally no information on ethnic origin or country of origin in criminal statistics. The exception to this is the Metropolitan Police who use a 6 point identity code for ethnic appearance when arrests are made. This is a subjective assessment by police officers. The categories are White European, Dark-skinned European, Black, Indian, Chinese, and Arab. (No other police force use such an identity code.) Although collected, this information is generally not published and is not readily available to researchers. Statistics occasionally come to light in the form of answers to Parliamentary questions. (see section below on Sus) These figures however are for arrests only, not convictions.

Further problems have been experienced with research carried out by the Home Office Research Unit using the identity code data. This research was referred to early in 1978 by the Commons Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration and publication has been expected for some months. The Metropolitan Police have however been highly critical of the work, and publication, because of their opposition, has been delayed, maybe indefinitely. It is thought that the police might well be defensive about the publication of figures showing disproportionately more black arrest figures with other factors such as unemployment, deprivation, poverty, and discrimination.

'Sus' Arrests under the Vagrancy Act 1824.

Arrest on 'sus' is the popular term used to describe arrests of 'persons frequenting with intent to commit an arrestable offence.' Sus cases fall into two distinct categories- tampering with car door handles and loitering with intent to steal from handbags. In neither case does an offence need to actually take place, the question is one of intention to commit an offence.

In 1976 3,501 people in England and Wales were proceeded against for 'sus'. Although no general information on the ethnic appearance of those arrested is available, there are figures for the Metropolitan Police District based on the 6 point identity code. This is by far the most important district in this respect since it (the Greater London area) accounts for 55% of all those proceeded against in England and Wales (1976 figures).

Figures for 'sus' arrests for the Metropolitan Police District are given below. These figures need to be compared with the number of ethnic minorities living in London. Exact comparisons are impossible, however, because the police code uses categories peculiar to the Metropolitan Police. The table shows a proportionately very high number of black arrests. It also shows that the largest numerical increase between 1976 and 1977 was in the number of arrests of blacks.

Arrests for 'sus' in London in 1976 and 1977 by ethnic appearance

Ethnic appearance	1976		1977	
	n	%	n	%
White European	1098	52	1197	51
Dark European	60	3	48	2
Black	887	42	1042	44
Indian	37	2	45	2
Chinese	4	0	5	0
Arab	24	1	27	1
Unknown	2	0	2	0
	2110	100	2366	100

Clare Demuth in a booklet for Runnymede Trust "'Sus' a report on the Vagrancy Act 1824," examined the pattern of sus arrests and convictions in London using official statistics, magistrate's courts records, interviews and a sample of hearings at magistrates courts (this was not a statistically representative sample.) Her findings were that a majority of the defendants in the cases examined in the 'intent to steal from handbags' category were black. "They were picked up in certain streets and Underground stations, particularly in the West End. A possible explanation of this pattern is that the police are using the Vagrancy Act as a method of deterring groups of pick-pockets from operating in certain areas. As the police believe that many, if not the majority, of pick-pockets working in these areas are black they direct their attentions particularly against young blacks. It is not possible to tell how indiscriminate the police are being in their use of the law. There have been a number of cases of obvious abuse and it is possible that the police are more concerned with asserting their control over blacks on the streets than the niceties of being certain that the youth in question was intending to commit an offence at the moment when he was arrested. What is certain is that the black community believes that the law is being used in this way." Clare Demuth also points out that 'sus' is an offence tried before a magistrate and that magistrates sometimes give the impression of bias towards the prosecution. About 80% of all those proceeded against for 'sus' are convicted. (1977 Home Office Statistics for England and Wales.)

Asian Crime in Bradford. McCulloch, Smith and Batta.

There has been little research on crime among coloured ethnic minorities in this country. What research there is suggests that there is a remarkably low crime rate for minorities of Asian origin, particularly those from India and Pakistan. McCulloch, Smith, and Batta state in 'A Comparative Study of Adult Crime amongst Asians and their Host Population,' (Probation Journal, Vol.21.. No.1, March 1974.) that the crime rates per 1,000 persons at risk for both Pakistanis and Indians in a sample from Bradford approximated only quarter of the rate for the remainder of the population. McCulloch, Smith, and Batta also suggested that the pattern of juvenile crime was very similar to that of the adults among the minorities of Asian origin, but overall their crime rates were considerably lower than that for adults. Another study conducted in Bradford in the years 1970-72 by the same authors (A Study of Juvenile Delinquency amongst Asians and Half-Asians, The British Journal of Criminology, Vol.15, No.1, January 1975) on Asians, half-Asians, and other juveniles (10-16 years old) confirmed the above findings. The findings also showed that half-Asians, or those from mixed marriages had a mean crime rate which

was nearly five times greater than that for Indian or Pakistani groups. The authors suggest that this may be so because half-Asians suffer not only from the recognised problems of children from 'coloured' ethnic groups, but also from an intensity of confusion relating to personal identity - they have neither the inherited Asian culture nor the white skin which would permit them to acquire full white status.

Other Studies

Whilst Bottoms and Wiles in their review paper criticise the Select Committees' conclusions mentioned earlier as "a good deal too dogmatic when one looks at the available evidence," they agree that the overall recorded crime rates of coloured immigrants in Britain are no higher than those of the native population. Asian crime rates have been discussed above. As for crime amongst West Indians, the evidence suggests that their crime rates for theft and most offences are low (eg. Bottomley 1965, Gibbons and Prince 1962, Hadden 1963.)

Muggings

Despite the fact that there is, generally, a relatively low rate of crime among ethnic minorities, there have recently been press reports implying that there may be a relatively high incidence of 'mugging' among young people of West Indian origin.

Although street crime figures by area of origin of the criminal are not generally published, the Lewisham Borough Council/Police Liaison Committee published a press-release in June 1975 which gave figures for muggings in the Lewisham and Deptford Police Sub-Divisions.

The figures showed that of the 103 cases of muggings during the period 1st January to 31st May 1975, 84 involved black youths. The press-release stated, "without in any way condoning these acts, which are being carried out by a small minority of youths, they must be viewed against the present economic and social background. It is known that unemployment in South East London is relatively high, particularly amongst young people and school leavers. This is especially true of black youths. Job availability locally does not offer much hope for the immediate future."

Although this comment related specifically to the London Borough of Lewisham, national figures for the rate of unemployment among those of West Indian origin suggest that the problem could be widespread. But mugging is not a peculiarly black crime: it is common in those areas where there is a lack of economic and social opportunities, in some of which, such as Glasgow, a West Indian population scarcely exists.

The lack of job opportunity and equal opportunity has been recognised by certain councils, such as the London Borough of Lewisham, which have been trying to attract industry to their area and have helped to establish projects through which young people can participate more fully in community life.

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