Some problems in interpreting Race and Crime Statistics

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In his report of a discussion of Race and Crime Statistics in Radical Statistics 30 Dave Drew pointed out some of the difficulties involved in interpreting criminal statistics. I wish to draw attention to some points which he ommitted and some inaccuracies. As he states, the Metropolitan Police District statistics for arrests for mugging show that people of West Indian origin (classified as "black-skinned" by the police) are over-represented compared with the population of London. However, in disagreement with Drew, the published statistics (see e.g. Home Office 1984, Stevens and Willis 1979) show that this is also the case for each of the Home Office's eight main offence groups. In 1981 (and 1983) the proportions of people arrested who were black-skinned varied from 13% for "criminal damage and miscellaneous" to 42% for "robbery and other violent theft". The overall figure was 17%, while the estimated black population in the whole of London was 5% (in 1977). The overall figure for Asians was 4% both among those arrested and in London as a whole.

It might be expected that West Indians would be over-represented since they tend to come from lower socio-economic groups and to be younger than the white population, and these are characteristics of the known offender population. Stevens and Willis examined arrest rates for different age groups and still found they were higher for West Indians than for white people. They were unable to adjust directly for social class, and no such analysis has yet been carried out. The Home Office (1984) has recently published a Bulletin giving statistics from the MPD for several years, including victims' assessments of race of assailant and other details. The introductory paragraphs draw attention to the many problems in interpreting the statistics. In particular, different groups probably vary in their likelihood of reporting offences. Overall for only 12% of all recorded offences is someone arrested. For the vast majority of offences the race of the offender and other details are unknown. Incidentally of all those convicted or cautioned black-skinned are again over-represented.

Another instance of where social class was not taken into account was in Landau's (1981) study, referred to by Drew. Landau, in a study of police decisions regarding juveniles in London, found that when black children are arrested the police are more likely to prosecute them immediately than white children (as opposed to referring them to a juvenile liaison bureau, the less severe decision), even when age and offence details are controlled for. However Bennett (1979) has shown that children of lower social class tend to receive more severe treatment by the police, and this might account for Landau's result. In another study Landau and Nathan (1983) found that at the juvenile liaison bureaux black children had a higher probability of being prosecuted than white children, as opposed to being cautioned, when controlled for age and offence data. The only indication of social class available was type of tenure, and this was found not to be significant. However while for white families higher social classes tend to have

more owner-occupiers this is not the case for black families (Smith 1977). So once again the difference in treatment by the police of black and white children may be due to differences in social class, and not race as such. Whether or not class should affect the decisions is another matter.

Lastly I wish to discuss the statistics quoted by Dave Drew from Racial Attacks (Home Office 1981) which seem to present a different problem of interpretation. Data was collected from 13 police forces and the overall black population of 242 thousand reported 124 racial incidents, the 482 thousand Asians reported 336 incidents, and the white population of 16047 thousand reported 217. This results in rates for Asians 52 times those of white and for blacks 38 times. It cannot be satisfactory to combine data from such large socially heterogeneous populations, but besides this there is apparently a paradox here, which was pointed out by John Custance (currently statistician at the MPD) which shows we should not really expect to find similar rates when the population sizes are so different.

For if, to simplify the argument, we combine the two black groups, there were 460 attacks against coloured groups, with a population of 724 thousand. Now if the 2 groups had the same (inter-racial) attacking rate of $677/16771 = .0404$ per thousand, there would be 648 white attackers $(.0404 \times 16047)$ and 29 coloured attackers $(.0404 \times 724)$ leading to 648 coloured victims and 29 white victims, giving victim rates of $648/724 = .90$ per thousand coloured people and .0018 per thousand white people. The coloured victim rate would be 500 times that of the white victim rate, even with white and coloureds having the same attacking rate.

It is surely more appropriate to look at the numbers of attacks by white on coloureds and vice versa, and to see if these differ significantly. For of 677 encounters in which there was a racial attack 217 had white victims and 460 had coloured victims. On the hypothesis of an equal chance of either being a victim we obtain $X_1^2 = 87.2$, so that (again) coloured people are significantly more likely to be victims. Of course, the usual proviso has to be made regarding the possible difference in the likelihood of reporting an attack. Data from Stevens and Willis shows that of recorded assaults, where there was a coloured attacker and white victim half had no injury, while for the other groups where race of attacker was recorded less than a quarter had no injury. Perhaps white victims are more readily reporting these assaults, or the police more readily recording them, or simply the coloured attackers are less violent.

There is considerable non-statistical evidence showing racial discrimination and prejudice in the community, and this is shown particularly clearly in the publication in the popular press of horrifying headlines about "black crime". It seems more difficult to find statistical data showing whether there really is discrimination within the Criminal Justice System.

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