

METROPOLITAN POLICE STATISTICS : RACE AND CRIME

Dave Drew

On March 15th Scotland Yard broke with its previous practice and published a racial analysis of those responsible for street robberies along with its annual review of crime in London. The Yard's analysis showed that 55 per cent of the victims of robbery and other violent thefts identified their attackers as coloured.

Although this was only one part of a detailed press release the media made full use of this opportunity to make the link between blacks and crime. The Daily Mail headline on March 11th was "Black Crime : The Alarming Figures" and compared the situation in London with the American ghettos. A Tory MP was quoted as saying "We must face the fact that a large number of young blacks are contemptuous of our ideas of law and order. The government has a duty to re-consider its immigration policy". The Sun declaimed "The Yard Blames Black Muggers", giving more space to its headline than its story and said "Gangs of vicious, merciless black muggers stand accused today of a crime wave that is threatening to turn London into New York a city in fear."

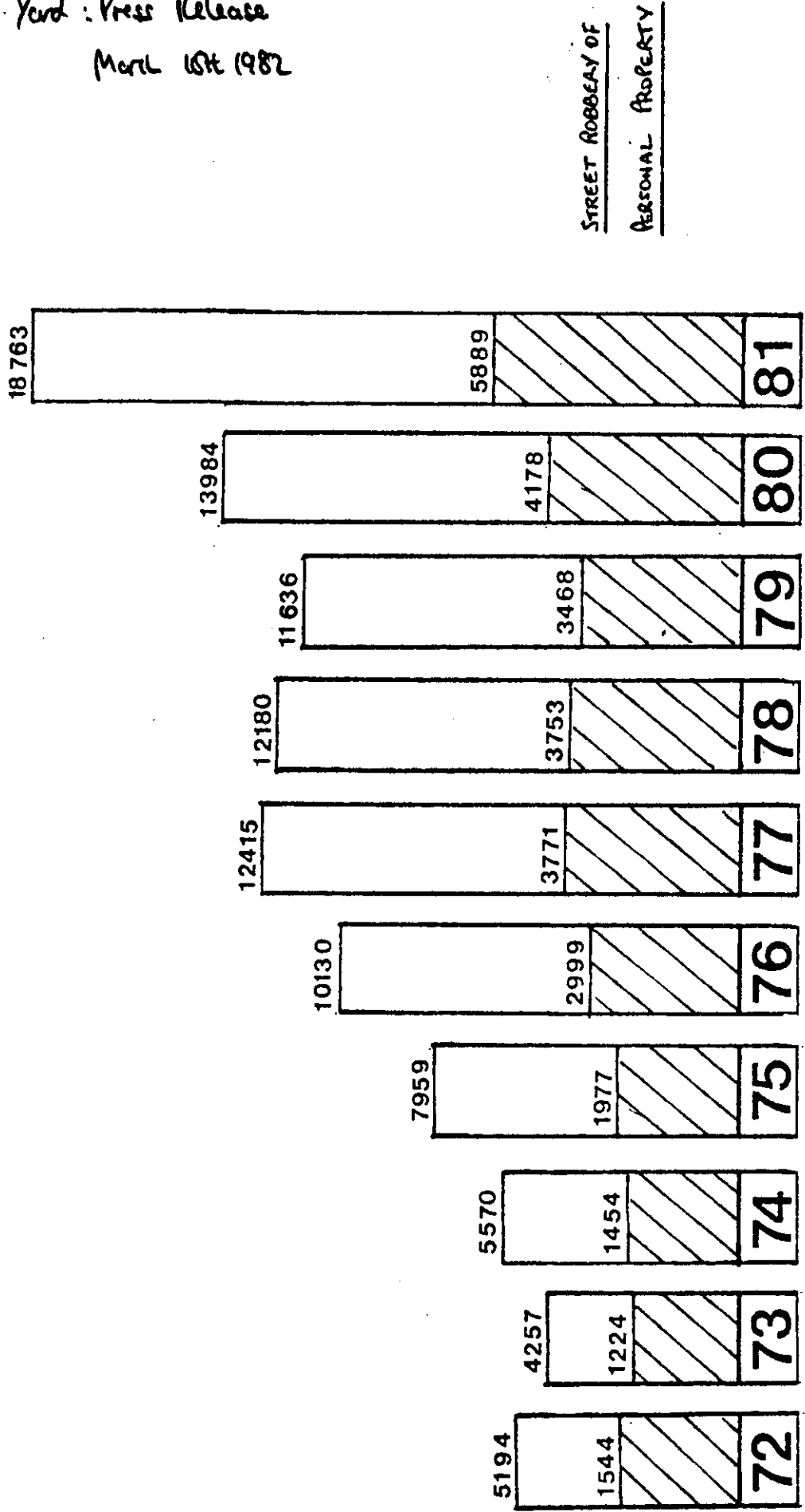
As Stuart Hall has pointed out, the media love crime statistics because they tend to go for 'hard' facts and there is no fact so hard as a number, unless it is the percentage difference between two numbers. But as anyone involved in crime statistics will know there are many problems in the use and interpretation of them. The list of points below draws attention to some of the issues raised by this press release.

1. Context of Publication

The public's 'need to know' was used to justify publication of the racial breakdown of these statistics. However the Metropolitan Police consistently opposed the publication of a recent report 'Race, Crime & Arrests' by the Home Office, a report which challenged the reliability of crime statistics and attempted to relate arrests in London with unemployment and other social factors. The public's need to know was obviously not felt so strongly in this case.

New Scotland Yard: Press Release
March 16th 1982

robbery and other violent theft 1972 - 1981



STREET ROBBERY OF
PERSONAL PROPERTY

2. Problems in the interpretation of crime statistics in general

Crime statistics cannot be taken just at face value. There is leeway for systematic distortion to occur at various stages of the criminal process.

- (i) Reporting of offences. There is little evidence on the relative likelihood of victims of black or white crime to report offences to the police. It has been suggested that white victims would be more likely to report an offence to the police when the offender was known to be black, while other research has suggested that Asian victims of white attacks rarely report them. Such tendencies would underestimate white involvement and overestimate black involvement in inter-racial crime. Most crime is intra-racial (eg white against white, black against black).
- (ii) Recording. Distortion could occur at the stage where reported offences are recorded or 'crimed'. Police forces vary in their methods of recording offences, though there is no evidence that reported offences committed by any group are more or less likely to be recorded by the police as a crime.
- (iii) Detection. The next step in the process at which distortion might arise is that of detection of a suspect for a criminal offence. It is possible that if police intelligence were better here, or patrolling more thorough there, these facts would show up in detection rates for the group concerned. More policing of an area therefore could result in the appearance of more, rather than less crime.

3. Mugging

Particular attention was given to the number of offences of robbery and other violent theft. This category was singled out although it constituted only 3% of all serious crime. On closer examination the figure for muggings was less than 1% of the total, the 'street robbery of personal property' category. The rise in crime was higher for other categories of crime than for this one (eg the rise for robberies of business premises open to the public was 83%).

These statistics and a study by a Metropolitan Policeman (Pratt 1980) show the popular stereotype of the muggers victim (ageing and female) to be a false one. 81% of the victims are male and the largest group of victims is in the 21-30 age group. Also the degree of injury is usually small, in 95% of cases there is either slight injury or no injury at all.

4. Victims

The use of a racial breakdown is very selective, there is no racial breakdown of victims, for example, nor is there a racial breakdown for other crimes in which there would undoubtedly be an under-representation of blacks.

A recent Home Office report on Racial attacks (1981) showed that, for incidents where there was evidence of a racial motive, Asians were 50 times as likely to be attacked as white people and West Indians 36 times as likely.

5. Other Research

It might be more profitable to look for causes of crime than for scapegoats.

- (i) Stevens & Willis (1979), a Home Office report, concluded that "the existence of a high recorded indictable crime rate in an area does not mean there is likely to be a high proportion of West Indians or Asians in the population of that area.

For example, Lambeth police division with a 1971 population which was 5.8% West Indian immigrant, had a recorded indictable crime rate of 5281 per 100,000; whereas Newcastle upon Tyne F division with a 1971 population which was around 0.05% West Indian immigrant had a higher recorded indictable crime rate of 6081 per 100,000". They also concluded that differences between white, black and Asian arrest rates in the MPD in 1975 could largely, though not wholly, be statistically accounted for by demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Blacks are over-represented in arrest prone groups, eg the young.

- (ii) Coleman (1982) used four psychometric tests to investigate the attitudes of police recruits before and after training, and probationer constables and a control group matched as far as possible to resemble the police samples in socio-economic status. He concluded that the police force tends to attract people who are more conservative and authoritarian than those of comparable socio-economic status in other occupations, and that "socialisation into the police sub-culture seems to foster hostile attitudes towards coloured immigration".

REFERENCES

- P Stevens & C Willis (1979) Race Crime and arrests. Home Office Research Report No 58
- M Pratt (1980) Mugging as a social problem. Routledge & Kegan Paul
- A Coleman (1982) Conservatism, dogmatism and authoritarianism in British Police Officers. Sociology 1982, 16, 1-11
- Home Office (1981) Racial Attacks.