

Race and Crime Statistics: Book Review

Race and Crime Statistics, by Susan Smith. Race Relations Fieldwork Background Paper No 4. August 1982. From: Race, Pluralism and Community Group, BSR, Church House, Dean's Yard, London SW1P 3JZ. 35p plus 15pdp.

This twenty page booklet discusses the issues surrounding the use of 'race' to categorise crime statistics. It was prompted by the press release issued by Scotland Yard on 10 March 1982, which contained for the first time data on 'victim perception of appearance of assailant'. The booklet looks at these data, discussing them in the light of other evidence and the context in which they were released.

The booklet begins with a brief discussion of the sources of statistics on crime in general, noting that only the Metropolitan Police explicitly use race to categorise arrests and more recently convictions. Colour of assailant has also been asked of victims of violent crime since 1975. The reliability of these sources is then discussed: the under-reporting of crime; the fact that not all crimes reported are solved; and the selectivity involved in proceeding from arrests to charges to convictions. Any attempt to make a racial comparison adds to these problems considerably, and the author notes that such difficulties 'seem, at every stage, to discourage the use of race-coded data'.

Under the heading 'the problem of meaning', Susan Smith goes on to mention that official crime statistics reflect more the bureaucracy of policing than the incidence of crime, and are biased, according to some, by the institutionalised racism of the judicial system. Because of this, the importance of official statistics 'as a means of detecting an imbalance in the dispensation of justice virtually demands that they are collected'. What seems to have been ignored here is the fact that these same data are widely used as if they accurately measured the incidence of crime in a community: these data go by the name of crime statistics, not justice statistics. But do the official statistics detect imbalances in the dispensation of justice? Probation data (used in the booklet as an example) may show a disparity in the treatment meted out to blacks and whites, but how do official statistics show unequal arrests, unequal charges and unequal convictions? How do they distinguish between any real differences according to race and judicial bias? Do we not need to know the 'truth' to measure these statistics against, a truth which the statistics are meant to measure in the first place?

The next section deals with studies of criminal activity, mainly in terms of crime rates compared to whites. The Irish were singled out in one study, but the evidence appears to be inconclusive. Asians enjoy lower crime rates than whites, and this fact is left to speak for itself. It is West Indians who are over-represented in the data on certain forms of crime, even after adjusting for age and social status. The author notes that this is not entirely attributable to racial bias in arrests, but does not consider probable biases after arrest - at charging and conviction - despite having acknowledged such possibilities earlier. Instead, she draws the uneasy conclusion that 'it would be a pity if Britain's law and order campaign were to focus too much on policing at the expense of recognising the disadvantaged structural position of blacks...'

Turning to the press release itself, Susan Smith points to various inaccuracies and exaggerations and to the fact that race is not mentioned at all in the text. However, it does appear in one of the tables concerned with recorded offences of robbery and other violent theft in that it is broken down by victims' perceptions of the colour of their assailant. This table received widespread attention despite the fact that such offences accounted for only 3% of all crime in 1981 and include theft from businesses as well as from individuals (mugging). In trying to understand the significance of the press release, three questions are considered. First, what new useful information the press release provided: none, because Home Office studies have already used Metropolitan Police data to show violent crimes to be disproportionately intra-racial, rather than predominantly committed by blacks against whites. Secondly, what part did the press play in emphasising the one table on race: a large part, both in news items and later feature articles, though their editorials criticised the police for distortion. Thirdly, was there a political motive: yes, to whip up a law and order campaign, which backfired, or yes, in the interests of certain sections of the Metropolitan Police. Either way, we all know who loses.

At 35p, the booklet is well worth a read for the issues it raises and for the list of a dozen or so useful references. For a more statistical and radical(?) approach, however, we must await the Race Group's forthcoming chapter.

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