

Ethnicity, harm and crime:

Response to a discussion paper by Rebecca Roberts and Will McMahon

Giving racism primacy as an explanation for the harms experienced by different ethnic groups is not only mistaken but increasingly risks being counter-productive.

Some minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by a range of harms which have a variety of adverse consequences, including an increased risk that young people from these groups will get involved in crime and/or come to the attention of the criminal justice system. These harms (poor housing, low educational attainment, unemployment, living in deprived, high crime neighbourhoods etc) are not exclusive to any ethnic group and the actual *number* of white British people who share these disadvantages will always be very much larger than the numbers of people from any given ethnic minority. That is, it is important to bear in mind that the notion of 'disproportionality' is based on crude group averages (with the groups in question often crudely and arbitrarily defined); but there may be wide variance around these averages and far more overlap between different groups on any given measure of harm than is usually acknowledged. In addition, no meaningful inferences can be drawn from inter-group comparisons without controlling for the standard relevant variables (i.e., as a minimum: age, gender, area and SES). Otherwise one not only risks comparing apples with pears but legitimating the assumption that the raw differences between these 'group' averages somehow measure an inherent difference between all of the members of the groups being compared.

That said, the range of harms in question tend to cluster differently for different groups and their impact on the group may further be compounded by other factors - one of which is the experience of racism in various forms including the legacy of past racism. Other factors, though, include differences in female economic activity and family structure/size plus the interactive effects of these factors.

For the groups worst affected, all of these factors in combination heighten their risk of involvement with the criminal justice system; but involvement with the criminal justice system in turn then further compounds their disadvantaged position since having a higher proportion of young men with a criminal record has an effect on the economic prospects of the group as a whole. It *may* also affect gender relations within the group (including expectations of boys and young men) but it is certainly likely to have inter-generational consequences since it is well established that having a parent with a criminal record heightens young people's risk of involvement in crime.

In sum, strategies for tackling racism are worthwhile in their own right but they are unlikely to make any noticeable difference to the statistical picture. (For example 'disproportionality' in the criminal justice statistics is now very much worse than it was before Macpherson reported.) In addition, strategies to tackle some of the wider underlying factors are unlikely to be effective if they focus only on minorities; and if they are *perceived* as being concerned only with minorities they are likely to be unnecessarily divisive, thereby actively fuelling the crudest manifestations of racism. Meanwhile, the publication of crude averages which perennially show particular ethnic groups to be over-

represented in the criminal justice system itself risks reinforcing negative stereotypes and lending them a spurious statistical legitimacy.

This is not argument for a 'colour blind' approach - although it should be noted that many of the newer groups likely to be adversely affected in these ways are white. However, it implies a responsibility for academics and other commentators:

- a) To avoid the temptation to ascribe the headline ethnic differences in the criminal justice statistics simplistically to 'racism'.
- b) To demand supplementary information which will allow the reasons for the differences to be explored with more rigour and sophistication. (On the model of Hood the aim should be to distil the extent to which ethnic differences remain even when other relevant factors have been taken into account, thereby making it possible to pinpoint *where* the problems are occurring rather than assuming that racist practices are endemic throughout the whole of the agency. For this risks leaving *all* those involved to infer that they stand accused, which is not only unjust but likely to prove inimical to the implementation of effective remedial action.)
- c) To use the crude ethnic data which are currently available instead to *monitor* the impact of supposedly race-neutral policies. This approach, for example, would show that the unprecedented rise in the prison population since New Labour came to power was reflected in an average increase in the numbers of British Indians in the male prison population but a much higher rise in the number of Black British males, while the highest rise of all was in the number of British Pakistani males - even though this group is still not over-represented in the prison population. That is, simply continuing to focus on 'disproportionality' would have failed to pick up this trend. Yet, at the same time, despite the generalised concern which has repeatedly been expressed about the rise in imprisonment, most critical commentators have failed to point out that the impact of this has not fallen evenly across the population but has had a disproportionately adverse impact on the most disadvantaged sections of the population, including the most disadvantaged minority groups.

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