Responding to Perpetrators of Racist Violence

Robyn Thomas identifies the need for strategies to challenge perpetrators of racist violence.

Racist violence is a topical governmental and political issue. The Macpherson Report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry provided a much-needed impetus for agencies to respond more effectively to racist harassment and violence. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced new racially aggravated offences which carry higher maximum penalties than their non-racially motivated equivalents. This was intended to demonstrate that a 'racial element adds to the seriousness of a crime' (Sibbitt 1998). The report defined a racist incident as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'. This means that 'black on white' violence can be determined racist as well as 'white on black'. Hence, the inherent power dynamic within racist violence is lost. This raises a number of issues when developing responses aimed at the perpetrators of racist violence. Projects which are seeking to develop strategic responses to and interventions with perpetrators of racist violence are now largely working in a theoretical vacuum.
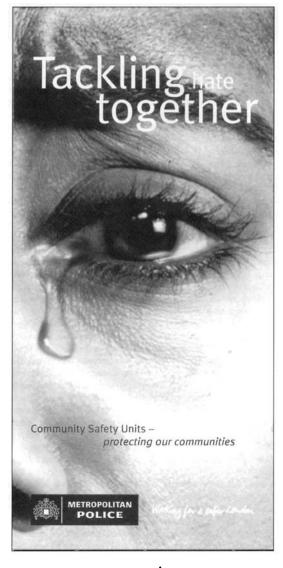
The identification and behaviour of perpetrators

Whilst there have been a number of reports on the effectiveness of multi-agency responses to racist incidents, little attention has been given to the identification and behaviour of perpetrators. Bowling has called for attention to be turned away from the particulars of victims to focus on the characteristics of offenders in recognition of the fact that "far too little is known about offenders' backgrounds, motives, motivations [and] relationships with communities" (Bowling 1998).

Sibbitt (1997) identified why so little research has been conducted on racially motivated perpetrators: there has been a general lack of offender-focused research and recent policy interest has targeted racist attacks; there is 'some tension' between characterising all racially motivated perpetrators as violent political extremists and the notion that the perpetrators could be "the boy or girl or man or woman next door who may be a little too close to home for comfort." I would also add that as the majority white population have not, in the main, experienced racist violence, it may simply not be a matter of concern to them. Sibbitt's research was conducted in two London boroughs. Whilst immensely informative, it was essentially qualitative and descriptive. It suggested a "complex profile of perpetrators: people from a wide age-range acting against a backdrop which

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includes social and economic factors and prejudice against ethnic minorities which is extensive and permeates entire communities". Indeed she argued "such communities, with their entrenched problems of socio-economic deprivation and crime, appear to 'spawn' violent [racist] perpetrators".

Like Bowling, Sibbitt concluded that in the long term strategies aimed at reducing or preventing racist harassment need to incorporate effective action against perpetrators, the development of strategies to divert potential perpetrators, and to address racist attitudes within the wider community towards minority ethnic groups.

It is vital that theoretical models should underpin such strategies. One of the few writers to examine the interrelationship of crime, gender, class and race is Messerschmidt. He used the concept of 'white supremacist masculinity' to examine historical forms of racist violence in Amercia such as lynchings. Messerschmidt concluded that "white ... men gained status, reputation and self respect through participation in ... lynchings' (1997). I would argue that perpetrators of racist violence gain similar prestige in the contemporary British context.

Implications for strategy and action

An exploratory multi-agency project in Newcastle, led by the City Council, is seeking to develop a holistic, strategic range of options

to work with and challenge perpetrators of racist violence. The above arguments comprise part of its theoretical foundation. The project is clear that its work needs to complement and support the work of existing racial harassment support projects.

Some of the challenging issues currently being tackled include: the dearth of evidence-based practice and theory; the identification of actual and potential perpetrators as distinct from offenders; working with an unpopular group of perpetrators; the necessity for white (institutionally racist) organisations to develop interventions with white racists; the long term educational and financial commitment required to impact on the attitudes and behaviours of perpetrators and the ongoing tension between funding a 'crime prevention' style project and achieving crime reduction targets.

The final structure of the project will be decided following consultation with a range of agencies and practitioners in the city. There are currently three models being considered:

1) The work could be added to the remit of existing projects working with young people aged 8 to 16 years old exhibiting anti-social behaviour. (This would not address some of those perpetrators identified by Sibbitt's typologies, such as adult neighbours and pensioners.)

2) A city-wide referral project, which would draw upon existing models of perpetrator intervention with domestic violence and/or sex offenders. However, the transferability and appropriateness of such work to perpetrators of racist violence has not yet been demonstrated.

3) The development of a specific project whose work would stem

from a theoretical and empirical base and which would advise and inform practitioners and officers from a variety of agencies.

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