

Understanding Ethnic Differences in Crime Statistics

Marian FitzGerald describes a study showing factors behind black disproportionality in crime statistics.

Police searches fell markedly after the Macpherson Inquiry but in 2001/2 they rose by 4 per cent, followed by a 21 per cent rise in 2002/3. (The searches referred to here are those undertaken under s.1 of the 1986 *Police and Criminal Evidence Act*. That is, they do not include searches under public order legislation or the Prevention of Terrorism Act.) The Home Office has not yet provided an ethnic breakdown for these latest figures; but the relatively modest change in 2001/2 masked a 23 per cent increase in searches on black people and an even larger increase in searches on Asians (28 per cent). These dramatic differences, though, have received little or no attention; for concerns have continued to focus on disproportionality – that is, the failure of the search figures to reflect the presence of different groups in the population at large. By 2001-2002, 12 per cent of all searches were on black people and 6 per cent were on Asians compared to 11 per cent and 5 per cent respectively when Labour came to power. From a ‘disproportionality’ perspective, searches on

need if we are to interpret them accurately. Without this we shall fail to diagnose the real problems they highlight and to tackle these effectively. Instead, the figures will continue to be co-opted by either side in a long-standing debate – on the one hand as proof of large-scale discrimination throughout the whole of the criminal justice system and, on the other, as pseudo-scientific support for negative racial stereotypes.

In my recent study with Jan Stockdale at LSE and Chris Hale at the University of Kent, we took a new approach to trying to understand some of the most sensitive and long-standing ethnic differences in criminal statistics (FitzGerald, Stockdale and Hale 2003). In 2001, the Youth Justice Board commissioned us to look at the reasons for the huge increase in young people’s involvement in this type of crime. Most of our empirical work was in London where the vast majority of young people coming into the criminal justice system for street crime were black.

The quantitative component of our study

‘Disproportionality’ in the crime figures reflects a wide range of general ‘risk’ factors. But these configure in a particular way which has a disproportionate impact on black people – especially black young men.

Asians are still not viewed as problematic since they remain roughly comparable to the 5 per cent presence of Asians in the population at large. By contrast, black people are represented in the search figures at four times the rate at which they were counted by the 2001 Census.

However, black ‘disproportionality’ is not peculiar to searches: it is also apparent in crime reports, arrests and at all subsequent stages of the criminal justice process. And it was already evident when statistics on the ethnic origin of prisoners first began to be collected 20 years ago. It seems ironic that disproportionality has actually worsened under a government which has given more attention than any previous administration to tackling institutional racism; but the fact that it is proving so intractable suggests the time has come to re-think our approach to interpreting ethnic differences in criminal justice statistics.

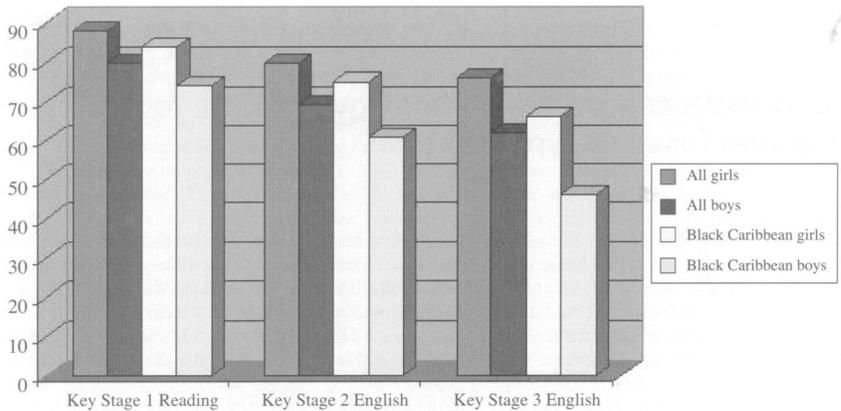
For figures like this are not self-explanatory; and we need to move to a clearer understanding of what they can (and can’t) tell us. This includes developing a better appreciation of what other information we

consisted of modelling significant variations in street crime between different London boroughs against a wide range of socio-economic and demographic data. As we built up the model, it was apparent that the size of any given borough’s black school-age population was highly correlated with its level of street crime; and so too were many other variables which would be grist to the mill of the right-wing press, including the proportion of single parent households. However, these were important only as long as other factors were ignored. Once we had included all of the possible explanatory variables for which we had information (including figures related to police activity) none of these factors was significant in its own right. Rather, the two overriding explanations for area differences in patterns of street crime were:

- deprivation – especially relative deprivation in areas where a higher than average proportion of young people were living in households with no earning adult; and
- population turnover.

The qualitative component of the study included

Key Stage Tests 2002-3
Selected results by gender



interviews with young offenders and the mothers of some offenders, as well as focus groups with school pupils aged 14 to 16. The results corresponded closely with the findings of our quantitative work and added insights. In particular, they highlighted the influence of area and of aspects of youth culture on young people whose personal circumstances already increased their risk of getting involved in crime. That is, the findings confirmed that the disproportionate extent to which young black men feature in the crime figures is not a function of their ethnicity. But, by the same token, they lent no support to the idea that these figures are perennially manufactured by a police service which is so irredeemably racist that it keeps fitting people up for crimes they didn't commit rather than pursue the real perpetrators.

In sum, the 'disproportionality' in the crime figures reflects a wide range of general 'risk' factors. But these configure in a particular way which has a disproportionate impact on black people – especially black young men.

To accept this is not to be complacent. These young men were not born to fail or to become criminals. Yet until and unless the factors which create this situation are addressed effectively, we shall continue to see future generations disproportionately caught up in the types of activity which are increasingly putting lives at risk – not least their own. This poses three major implications for policy and practice.

In the first place it requires an honest appraisal of what has happened to large numbers of young men who, by the early years of secondary school, have begun to fall badly behind their white peers. Figures published by the Department for Education and Skills have recently shown a widening gulf between boys and girls in the same group from the time they start school. In as much as this reflects an alienation from education which is especially marked among boys in deprived areas, regardless of ethnicity, it is a good example of a general problem which, for structural reasons, disproportionately affects black boys. Importantly, this implies that race-specific interventions – even if they are appropriate – are unlikely to be enough.

Secondly, eternal vigilance is needed to safeguard against the ways in which the criminal justice system may amplify these pre-existing disadvantages. The fact that prejudice may now be

expressed with greater subtlety suggests that, while overt discrimination may still occur, it is probably less of a problem than in the past; and the challenge now lies in capturing the unequal exercise of discretion. We also need a more holistic view of how the system operates, since even small and apparently insignificant differences at each of its stages may cumulatively produce significantly adverse outcomes for different groups (FitzGerald 1993). But, above all, we need to use the ethnic data to monitor the impact of more general policies on particular groups – including groups who we have ignored in the past. For, as with the rise in searches, the huge recent increases in the prison population have been higher still for minorities, including the Asian group.

Finally, though, we shall not be able to address these two sets of issues – still less tackle them effectively – until we cut ourselves free from the albatross of assuming that 'disproportionality' *de facto* equals discrimination.

Marian FitzGerald is Visiting Research Professor, Mannheim Centre, LSE.

References

- Ayres M., Murray L. and Ransford F. (2003) *Arrests for Notifiable Offences and the Operation of Certain Police Powers under PACE*. Statistical Bulletin 17/03. Home Office.
- DFES (2004) *National Curriculum Assessment and GCSE/ GNVQ Attainment by Pupil Characteristics, in England, 2002 and 2003* <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway>
- FitzGerald M. (1993) *Ethnic Minorities and the Criminal Justice System*. Research Study No. 20, Royal Commission on Criminal Justice.
- FitzGerald M., Stockdale J. and Hale C. (2003) *Young People's Involvement in Street Crime*. Youth Justice Board.
- Home Office (2002) *Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System*. Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office.