

A call for action: engaging all communities

Lee Jasper argues that ethnic disproportionality could be addressed in part through community engagement.

Despite much improvement during recent years and areas of impressive practice, a great deal more needs to be done to ensure that community engagement is meaningful and comprehensive, and that the rhetoric of justice agencies is consistently turned into a reality. Public confidence in the criminal justice service – whilst improved in many regions including London – remains much lower than it could and should be, whilst the UK’s diversity vividly highlights the need for proactive engagement with all sections of the population. The need for engagement is also highlighted by the still emerging challenges posed by anti-terror policing and security operations which may impact disproportionately on particular sections of the community and which could be perceived by some to be targeting communities that may already only have limited confidence in, or engagement with, the justice system. Nowhere is this more important than in London, where over 2.1 million people belong to a black, Asian or minority ethnic group – 29 per cent of the capital’s population.

The need to tackle disproportionality

The challenges of ensuring effective community engagement are set against a backdrop of a deeply disturbing situation where experiences of offending, victimisation and involvement with the criminal justice service vary considerably among different ethnic groups. Nowhere can this be seen more vividly than amongst the black population. Successive editions of the Home Office’s *Section 95 Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System* have shown that black people are significantly over-represented as suspects, defendants and offenders and significantly under-represented as criminal justice workers, especially at a senior level. In London, adult black people – who make up 10 per cent of the capital’s population – make up 36 per cent of stop and searches, 32 per cent of arrests, 29 per cent of those accused, 27 per cent of those cautioned, 31 per cent of those found guilty, 35 per cent of those in prison and 26 per cent of those on probation. This not only undermines the confidence many communities have in criminal justice, but also risks perpetuating stereotypes that may hinder meaningful engagement. Worryingly, this pattern shows no indication of changing: young black Londoners (aged under 18) are three times as likely as white people to be stopped and searched. In some London boroughs

young black people are staggeringly up to 13-14 times more likely than their white counterparts to be stopped and searched.

Whilst the causes of this over-representation are complex and some of the answers lie outside the justice system, research – including from the Government itself – has shown that it cannot be wholly explained by the extent and nature of offending. The clear implication of this is that there is direct and institutional racism towards black people within the justice system that is not being adequately addressed. This arguably reflects a lack of truly effective engagement with communities and in turn has a major impact on the confidence levels and willingness to engage of these same communities. So too does the fact that people from black, Asian, minority and ethnic (BAME) communities are massively under-represented in the workforce of the criminal justice system, especially at senior levels.

Improved community engagement by criminal justice agencies is essential if this disproportionality is to be addressed. However, whilst necessary, community engagement alone is unlikely to be sufficient in winning the confidence of all communities unless backed up by a genuine commitment on the part of all criminal justice agencies to better understand the extent and causes of disproportionality. As a very minimum this means that criminal justice agencies, working as members of their local criminal justice board, need to take responsibility for providing clear, comprehensive and detailed demographic data including by ethnicity so that the true picture of the extent of disproportionality can be understood and subsequently addressed.

Taking responsibility for engagement

Through taking responsibility in this way, criminal justice agencies can demonstrate a real commitment to engaging with the problems that communities are currently facing in their interactions with the criminal justice service. Justice agencies can also demonstrate their commitment to serving all sections of society through continuing to develop ways for communities to engage with their work and decision-making processes.

Put simply, the criminal justice service needs to put communities at the heart of crime reduction, prevention and community safety policy. This is one of the principles which is at the heart of the Mayor of London’s commitment to the Metropolitan Police’s

Safer Neighbourhoods programme, which will see every council ward in the capital having a full neighbourhood policing team in place by December 2006, consisting of a minimum of one sergeant, two police constables and three police Community Support Officers.

Safer Neighbourhoods Teams are leading the way in ensuring the Metropolitan Police listen and respond to the concerns of local people. By putting communities at the heart of community safety, building in local accountability and focusing on prevention rather than cure, Safer Neighbourhoods Policing has at its core principles that will not only enable it to become an international model of good practice, but provides a victim focus and people-led approach which should be at the heart of the entire criminal justice system.

Whilst I am greatly encouraged by the excellent work being carried out by the police, by many youth offending teams and other agencies, far more could be done to reconnect communities with the justice process. All parts of the criminal justice system need to be working harder to connect with the communities they serve.

That is why I would like the Government to look seriously at extending the principle of community courts to London, building on the pilot Community Justice Centre in North Liverpool which is already making a difference by listening to local people and giving them an opportunity to get involved in reducing local crime and anti-social behaviour. At present, too often victims and witnesses are alienated from the justice process and subject to a courts lottery, where when a case is heard is down more to where someone lives than the demands of justice. I believe we need a new network of community and specialist courts, where local communities are embraced by, and not alienated from, the justice process.

There is also a need to ensure that voluntary and community sector organisations, especially those representing communities that may currently be marginalised, have the capacity to engage with criminal justice agencies and to participate in the justice process. This is likely to require a sustained programme of support for existing and emerging organisations in order to ensure that hard-to-reach groups are accessed and engaged with. There is a particular need to ensure that the voluntary and community sectors are equipped to provide support to victims of crime and to ex-offenders – two particularly vulnerable groups.

The way forward

Whilst the challenges faced in ensuring meaningful community engagement are considerable, the consequences of not meeting these are severe. If the police, courts, probation, prisons and other justice agencies fail to engage effectively then we will be unsuccessful not only in building confidence in the justice system but also in building and maintaining

a safe and stable society. However, I believe we are better placed than ever before to make real progress and I am convinced that increasingly criminal justice agencies are recognising the value that can be added to their work through constructive community engagement. The challenge now is to ensure that real progress is continued, and that all parts of the criminal justice service take every opportunity to work together and with the communities that they serve.



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