Navigating the system: The Experiences of young Black men in prison

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For several decades, the unjust treatment of Black individuals has been noted within academic research and government reports; notably highlighted in The Macpherson Report (1999),[1] The Lammy Review (2017),[2] and The Casey Review (2023).[3] It is understood that treatment within prisons is inadequate and insufficient, particularly for young Black men. However, academic literature and policies tends to focus on how to mitigate institutional racism that exists within the entirety of the criminal justice system (CJS), as opposed to addressing the root causes of systemic racial disparities and acknowledging the lived experiences of those who are affected by such issues.[4] Whilst incentives and plans have been introduced to achieve an anti-racist CJS, such as The Police Race Action Plan,[5] these plans appear to be a plaster for vast social issues. Although such incentives are in place to mitigate systemic racism within the CJS and reduce disproportionality for Black individuals in the system, these plans fail to consider the root causes of systemic racism, as well as the difference of experiences between ethnic groups; both of which are often overlooked. The authors question how UK plans and initiatives can reflect the needs of young Black men if there is a lack of rich qualitative data and therefore, there is a lack of clarity about their needs.

The relationship between ethnic minority individuals and the CJS is, and has been, fractured for decades. This comes as a consequence of decades of systemic bias and racism that has, arguably, been poorly mitigated by incentives such as The Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Race Action Programme (RAP).[6,7] Whilst it is difficult to measure progress on whether these initiatives are making a substantial difference due to their recent implementation, it can be questioned when the issues of systemic bias and racism will be explored in further depth across all silos within the CJS. Although the movement to address such issues shows a level of effort, there are gaps to fill, and the current work is, arguably, insufficient.

Criminal justice legislation

The tensions between ethnic minority individuals and the CJS have been felt for some time, dating back to key race-related incidents such as the 1981 Brixton Riots that were symbolic of these tensions. These riots occurred as a result of social deprivation, systemic racism and oppressive policing strategies where the use of stop and search under the 'sus' law targeted young Black men at a vastly disproportionate rate. Shortly after, the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 raised further issues into the policing of young Black men. Such incidents emphasised the urgency of addressing institutional racism, which was partially acknowledged in legislative responses like the Race Relations Act 1965 and its later amendments (1968; 1976; 2000), that prohibited racial discrimination in public institutions. Despite the fact that the issue of racial discrimination and racial bias has been prevalent for a considerable length of time, both nationally and internationally, legal acknowledgement of these issues were, arguably,

1. Macpherson of Cluny, Sir William. (1999). *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny.* HM Government.
2. Lammy, D. (2017). *The Lammy Review: An Independent Review into the Treatment of, and Outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Individuals in the Criminal Justice System.* HM Government.
3. Baroness Casey. (2023). *The Baroness Casey Review: Final Report, an independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service.* Metropolitan Police Service.
4. Mirza, H.S., & Warwick, R. (2024) Race and ethnic inequalities. *Oxford Open Economics, 3* (1), 365-452.
5. College of Policing (2022). *Police Race Action Plan: Improving policing for Black people.* College of Policing.
6. See footnote 5: College of Policing (2022)
7. HM Prison & Probation Service. (2021). *An updated response to: Race equality in probation: The experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic probation service users and staff.* HMPPS.

delayed and undermined the urgency of mitigating racial discrimination. It can also be viewed that the legislation was reactive, in responding to the rising tensions, rather than preventive, and dismantling systemic biases were not addressed.[8] Whilst legislation has shifted, and both indirect and direct racial discrimination are now prohibited through The Equality Act 2010, race-related incidents are prevalent today; with racially motivated hate crimes accounting for over two-thirds of such offence.[9] Although hate crime legislation sets out the penalties for such crimes, the severity of racial discrimination, both legally and morally, is perhaps not always considered by the criminal justice system.

Socioeconomic inequalities

Historically, young Black individuals have been disproportionality affected in most aspects of life; education, employment, healthcare, housing, and across the entirety of the CJS (as victims, suspects and people convicted of crime).[10] The issues of disproportionality stem from social inequality faced in these sectors of society; factors that have been delved into in academic literature for several decades yet remain a significant issue today. Structural disadvantage has disproportionately affected Black communities, with young Black men often facing compounded social exclusion, which in turn correlates with increased contact with the CJS.[11] A significant number of Black children are excluded from school, compared with other ethnic groups,[12] creating a 'PRU [pupil referral unit] to prison pipeline' and criminalising Black children from a young age;[13] ultimately impacting their trust and confidence in the system. There are notable parallels between trends in education and employment, particularly in relation to persistent racial disparities. The high rate of school exclusions for Black children impacts their knowledge and skills and overall, it can impact their employability. Black individuals in England and Wales experience significantly higher rates of unemployment, with an unemployment rate of 9 per cent compared with the national average of 4 per cent.[14] Whilst the gap in unemployment may reflect historical and ongoing structural inequalities within the labour market, as well as socioeconomic disparities and biases in hiring processes, it is argued that there is some correlation between the racial inequalities faced in both education and employment.

Considering the disparities that Black individuals face within education and employment, it is not surprising that similar disparities are noted within healthcare. Despite the fact that accessing healthcare has been an issue for some time, ethnic minority individuals experience significant inequalities in accessing both physical and mental healthcare.[15] Black individuals are at a higher risk of experiencing mental illness,[16] and limited access to healthcare can contribute to adverse long-term outcomes, including the increased likelihood of undiagnosed health conditions such as depression. With many young men in custody having high rates of trauma,[17] and many young Black men experiencing mental health conditions due to unjust policing experiences, it is vital that access to healthcare is drastically improved.

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Reflecting on the issues of socio-economic exclusions, evidently the impact of systemic racism can have a detrimental impact on the quality of life of Black individuals. It is widely known and acknowledged that Black and ethnic minority individuals are over-policed and under-protected in the CJS. Whilst Black individuals tend to be over-policed in stop and search practices,

8. Solomos, J. (1989). *Race Relations Legislation and the Political Process. In: Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain.* Palgrave.
9. Home Office (2024). *Hate crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024.* Home Office.
10. Ministry of Justice (2024). S*tatistics on Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System.* Ministry of Justice.
11. Bowling, B., & Coretta, P. (2012). Ethnicities, racism, crime and criminal justice. In M. Maguire, R. Morgan, & R. Reiner (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (5th ed). Oxford University Press.
12. Department for Education (2024). *Permanent Exclusions.* Department for Education.
13. Perera, J. (2020). *How Black Working-Class Youth are Criminalised and Excluded in the English Schol System: A London Case Study.* Institute of Race Relations.
14. Murray, A. (2024). *Unemployment by ethnic background.* House of Commons Library.
15. Kapadia, D., Zhang, J., Salway, S., Nazroo, J., Booth, A., Villarroel-Williams, N., Becares, L., & Esmail, A. (2022). *Ethnic inequalities in healthcare: A rapid evidence review.* NHS Race and Health Observatory.
16. Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2021). *Criminal justice system failing people with mental health issues – with not enough progress over the past 12 years.* HM Government.
17. Spark Inside (2023). *Being Well Being Equal: Prioritising the wellbeing of young men and young Black men in the criminal justice system.* Spark Inside.

with Black individuals being over nine times more likely to be subject to a stop and search than white individuals,[18] the lack of support that Black individuals receive throughout the criminal justice processes may result in them feeling under-protected in comparison to white individuals. To further highlight the persistent disparities that occur,[19] Black and ethnic minority defendants are sentenced more harshly than their white counterparts.[20] These are simply a few clear indicators of the systemic disparities that Black individuals are facing. Despite these disparities having been highlighted for several decades, the movement to address these issues is still ongoing. Whilst key reports were, and continue to be, published that highlight clear institutional racism in England and Wales, the findings and recommendations in these reports identify similar issues; all that are yet to be fully addressed. Although some steps have been taken to address the issues, for example, cultural awareness training provided to CJS staff, it is often questioned why there is a severe lack of movement within society to mitigate racism, racial inequality and systemic biases, and the lack of progress is not fully understood.[21] In addition, the strategies and plans that may address and resolve some of the longstanding issues, i.e., PRAP and RAP, which have formed over 20 years following the MacPherson Report, which many argue is considerably delayed for such a widespread issue and diminishes the urgency of the recommendations listed in official reports. As such, the levels of trust and confidence within Black and ethnic minority communities have drastically decreased over the last several years, with Black individuals' trust in their local police decreasing over 10 per cent from 2017 to 2020, from 76 per cent to 64 per cent.[22] Although this is reflective of some key incidents occurring during this time, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd, it can be argued that without timely and meaningful solutions, levels of trust will continue to decrease.

> It is often questioned why there is a severe lack of movement within society to mitigate racism.

Whilst the awareness of racial inequalities emerges in children at an early stage of development, including the awareness of structural and political inequalities,[23] it can also be argued that the issue of institutional racism within the CJS cannot be mitigated without addressing the root causes, i.e., the sociological factors that are noted above. It must be noted that such issues are not solely faced by Black individuals, and other ethnic groups are affected by disproportionate treatment, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups, who tend to be overlooked within policies, strategies and academic literature.

Experiences within prison

The experiences of young Black men (YBM) within prison are marked by disproportionate treatment, both during imprisonment and upon release, which reflects systemic issues that permeate various aspects within the CJS. These disparities are influenced by factors such as the lack of ethnic diversity among prison staff, inadequate mental health support available both during imprisonment and upon release, and the prevalence of gang-related violence within prisons.

The underrepresentation of Black staff is an issue throughout the CJS and ultimately impacts engagement between Black individuals and the system throughout the entire criminal justice process. Currently, 4 per cent of prison staff identify as Black,[24] despite the fact that Black adults make up approximately 12 per cent of the prison population.[25] This disparity points not only to recruitment challenges within the sector, but also to wider institutional barriers that affect career progression and staff retention; both of which are vast issues. The lack of staff diversity can lead to strained staff-to-prisoner relationships, particularly for Black prisoners, who note that they experience feeling culturally misunderstood and unfairly treated.[26] Without ethnic representation within

18. Home Office. (2021). *Stop and search data and the effect of geographical differences.* HM Government.
19. See footnote 18: Home Office (2021).
20 . Veiga, A., Pina-Sanchez, J., & Lewis, S. (2022), Racial and ethnic disparities in sentencing: What do we know, and where should we go? *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 62*(2), 168-172.
21. Bansal, N., Karlsen, S., Sashidharan, S. P., Cohen, R., Chew-Graham, C. A., & Malpass, A. (2022). Understanding ethnic inequalities in mental healthcare in the UK: A meta-ethnography. *PLoS medicine, 19*(12), 1-3.
22. Office for National Statistics (2021) *Confidence in the local police.* GOV.UK
23. Jones, V., Gorell Barnes, L., Pawson, C., Podpadec, T., Vafadari, J., & Whitehouse, S. (2022). *Young people's experiences of racism and their impact on mental health and wellbeing: a report for schools.* RESPECT Project Bristol.
24. Ministry of Justice (2024). P*rison officer workforce.* Ministry of Justice.
25. Ministry of Justice (2024). *Statistics on Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System, 2022.* Ministry of Justice.
26. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2022). *The experiences of adult Black male prisoners and Black prison staff.* HM Government.

staff, Black prisoners may experience feelings of systemic exclusion; where prisoners cannot see themselves reflected in the staff that are there to support them. Although efforts have been made to improve representation, such as targeted recruitment campaigns, such initiatives remain superficial when Black staff who are employed in the Prison Service often experience racial discrimination, microaggressions and limited opportunities for progression.[27] This observation limits the effectiveness of diversity initiatives whilst also discouraging prospective Black applicants from joining, or current Black staff from remaining within the Prison Service. It may be argued that these issues must be addressed before creating initiatives to recruit further. The underrepresentation of Black staff within this setting is hugely impactful, and the shortage of Black or ethnically diverse mental health practitioners causes further issues; see paragraph below.

In addition, mental health support for YBM in English and Welsh prisons remains inadequate, which reflects broader systemic failures in both healthcare and the CJS. Individuals in custody experience disproportionately high rates of mental health illnesses, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and personality disorders;[28] and for YBM, these challenges are compounded by intersecting factors such as racism, social marginalisation, and the effects of imprisonment itself. However, the support available to Black individuals is often limited, inaccessible, or culturally inappropriate.[29] Similar to the lack of racial diversity within prison staff, it is unsurprising that there is also a lack of culturally competent mental health care, and the current psychological interventions and services are not tailored to reflect the cultural backgrounds or lived experiences of Black prisoners. It can be argued that the lack of adequate mental health support, and the lack of ethnic diversity in staff, are intrinsically linked. Despite the fact that Black men are at a higher risk of experiencing mental illness, as discussed previously, access to mental health services in prison continues to be inconsistent, under-resourced and not

entirely reflective of the prison population that it should support. Young people often face difficulty in obtaining timely assessments and treatments, due to mental health services becoming overstretched.[30] Whilst these issues affect all individuals who are imprisoned, they are particularly consequential for young Black men, who experience disproportionate treatment throughout the criminal justice process. It is vital that mental health is not viewed in isolation from broader prison conditions, and the specific factors that disproportionality affect Black prisoners are considered.

It is evident that existing social inequalities, such as the over-policing of Black communities, exacerbates the challenges that young Black men face as they enter the prison system, where they are further marginalised. In this environment, they are often subject to institutionalised racism, prison violence and gang affiliations, which are often racialised. With YBM prisoners often experiencing feelings of exclusion, gang membership can be seen as a way to secure safety.[31] Often, YBM are both victims and perpetrators of gang-related violence, which has an impact on the rehabilitation process for many, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Without timely and meaningful solutions, levels of trust will continue to decrease.

Rehabilitation

Despite the fact that reducing reoffending and assisting individuals with societal reintegration are vital, rehabilitation programmes in English and Welsh prisons are often underfunded and poorly implemented, resulting in limited success in supporting reintegration and minimising reoffending.[32] YBM are particularly impacted by this, as they experience challenges within the prison, but also upon release, specifically in securing housing and employment.[33] The challenges of reintegration highlight the urgent need for systemic reform, including, but not limited to, increased funding for rehabilitation programmes; improved training for prison staff; and a comprehensive support system that continues to support individuals beyond prison.

27. See footnote 2: Lammy (2017).
28. Murie, M., Marr, C., Kasinathan, J., Lloyd, T., & Dean, K. (2025). The Mental Health of Young People Entering Custody: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Child Youth Forum,* 2-6.
29. Memon, A., Taylor, K., Mohebati, L., Sundin, J., Cooper, M., Scanlon, T., & de Visser, R. (2016). Perceived barriers to accessing mental health services among black and minority ethnic (BME) communities: a qualitative study in Southeast England. *BMJ Open.* 6(11), 1-6.
30. Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition. (2023). *Children and young people's mental health: An independent review into policy success and challenges over the last decade.* Local Government Association.
31. Crewe, B. (2009). *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison.* Oxford University Press
32. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). *National Preventive Mechanism: Thirteenth annual report 2021-22.* HM Government.
33. Robertson, L., & Wainwright, J.P. (2020) Black boys and young men's experiences with criminal justice and desistance in England and Wales: A literature review. *Genealogy. 4*(2), 2.

A key issue that contributes to the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation programmes is the lack of training and continuous professional development opportunities for prison staff.[34] Due to the lack of ethnic diversity amongst prison staff, it is vital that appropriate cultural competency training is provided. Without sufficient training, individuals can feel misunderstood and mistrusted, particularly YBM, ultimately impacting their engagement with rehabilitation both whilst in prison and upon release. Many YBMs who enter prison have history of trauma and mental health issues, and arguably, the need for sufficient support is particularly vital for this demographic. The lack of training mainly comes as a result of insufficient funding amongst the CJS, particularly impacting HMPPS. Whilst this is a considerable barrier, it is one that must be reviewed, as tailored mental health support and rehabilitation programmes are known to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.[35]

Furthermore, YBM experience difficulties reintegrating into society as a result of the socio-economic disadvantages that they experience (discussed in the section *Socioeconomic inequalities*). Black individuals are disproportionality represented among prison leavers who experience housing instability upon release, which may significantly increase the likelihood of reoffending.[36] Without stable accommodation, individuals will struggle to access other reintegrative support services such as healthcare, education, or employment, due to these services requiring the individual to provide a fixed address. Due to the current housing crisis in England and Wales 'at least 8.5 million people in Britain are living with some kind of unmet housing need' (p. 8).[37] With difficulties in securing accommodation, or being in accommodation that is

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not fit for purpose, rehabilitation for YBM becomes even more difficult.

Although employment is a clear barrier for all individuals upon release, with the disadvantages that YBM already face, employment is significantly more difficult for YBM. Applicants with a criminal record are less likely to be hired, and there is a particularly strong reluctance for employers to hire convicted Black individuals.[38] Pager's study, based on New York City data, showed that Black applicants with a criminal record are less often invited to interview, and receive fewer opportunities from employers — compared to white applicants with a criminal record.[39] While specific England and Wales-focused longitudinal data is more limited, similar patterns of racial disadvantage are acknowledged.[40] With YBM experiencing difficulties with employment more generally, the addition of holding a criminal record makes gaining employment upon release near impossible, meaning YBM are at a greater risk of poverty, social exclusion and reoffending.

As a result of the difficulties that YBM face within society generally, and within the context of the CJS specifically, the psychological and social consequences are not to be overlooked. As discussed, mental health support tends to be lacking, but particularly post-release mental health support. With Black individuals' possessing a high reoffending rate of 26 per cent, mental health support to support reintegration and minimise reoffending is extremely vital.[41] Furthermore, many Black individuals highlight that they experience intense surveillance and marginalisation upon release, highlighting the 'urgent need to take seriously the racialisation of crime' (p. 11).[42] Providing adequate and worthwhile mental health support is particularly urgent for young Black men, who

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34. See footnote 28: Murie, M., Marr, C., Kasinathan, J., Lloyd, T., & Dean, K. (2025).
35. O'Shea, N., & Bell, A (2021). *A spending review for wellbeing: The case for investment in children's mental health.* Centre for Mental Health.
36. Ajai-Thomas, C. (2024). *Young Black People's Experiences of Homelessness in London: Homelessness and Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities in the UK: A knowledge and capacity building programme.* Heriot-Watt University
37. Kiberd, E., & O'Conner, A. (2024). *The Foundations of The Housing Crisis: How Our Extractive Land and Development Models Work Against Public Good.* New Economics Foundations
38. Pager, D., Western, B., & Sugie, N. (2009). Sequencing Disadvantage: Barriers to Employment Facing Young Black and White Men with Criminal Records. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 623*(1), 1-19.
39. See footnote 38: Pager, D., Western, B., & Sugie, N. (2009)
40. See footnote 30: Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition. (2023).
41. Ministry of Justice (2024). *Reoffending [data set]. Ethnicity facts and figures.* HM Government. Reoffending - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures
42. Williams, P., & Clarke, B. (2018). The Black Criminal Other as an Object of Social Control. *Social Science, 7*(11), 1-14.

experience a lack of trust in the CJS from a young age, and this level of trust often tends to continue to decrease (see section *Criminal justice legislation*).

Overall, reintegration and rehabilitation for young Black individuals is vital but a political and structural challenge. The factors discussed above, housing instability, limited/a lack of employment opportunities, institutional discrimination, and a lack of tailored support services, all contribute to high reoffending rates and poor post-prison outcomes. The authors argue that in order to address these issues, there must be a concerted effort by policymakers and criminal justice institutions to invest in equitable housing access, fair employment practices, holistic reintegration programmes and solid mental health support services that recognise the unique experiences of young Black men in the CJS.

Recommendations

To address the persistent disproportionality and adverse experiences of YBM within England and Wales prison systems, a comprehensive and structural approach is required, one that acknowledges the intersectionality of race, age, and systemic disadvantage.

1. **Plans that reflect unified strategies and approaches:** Whilst there is some movement to address racial disproportionality, for example, the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP) and the HMPPS' Race Action Programme (RAP), these plans both have different focuses in relation to ethnicity and therefore create differences in treatment. With the PRAP focusing on improving policing for Black individuals, and the RAP focused on improving outcomes for Black and ethnic minority individuals, these plans are disparate. Although some movement, i.e., creating such plans, is useful to improving community engagement, trust and confidence in the CJS, the authors argue that the initiatives and plans must correlate with one another. This ensures that individuals receive the same treatment, access to services and support throughout the CJS, rather than differing approaches.
2. **Responding to the needs of all ethnic communities:** Furthermore, there must be a strong focus on the experiences of prison by ethnicity; although, not solely focusing on

Black individuals. A large proportion of the academic literature based on race and crime focuses on Black individuals, and whilst it is important to have a strong focus on Black individuals due to the pertinent issues that are present within disproportionality in the CJS, the literature must also give attention to other ethnic minority groups. Often other ethnic minority groups tend to be overlooked within policy and practice as a result, for example, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals who experience racism and discrimination within prisons.[43] The inclusion of all ethnic groups will allow solid plans to drive forward fair and just treatment for all individuals who have experience within the CJS. Whilst some work has been done to acknowledge the lived experience of other ethnic groups, minimal work has been done to make a considerable difference to public trust and confidence in the CJS.

3. **Improved training opportunities:** With young Black and mixed heritage individuals often having complex presenting needs,[44] there is a pressing need to expand rehabilitation programmes that align with the cultural and social experiences of young Black men. Such programmes should reflect the lived experiences of individuals, and incorporate community-led approaches, which may help shape policy and practice, and engagement and reduce reoffending. The authors stress that mentorship and education, particularly programmes such as Offending Behaviour Programmes, within prisons must be expanded, with individuals receiving mentoring from an individual with a similar ethnic background to understand the lived experience. In addition, training programmes must also consider the needs of individuals, such as age, with older individuals facing challenges in engaging in prison training programmes and activities.[45] Furthermore, employing local external organisations to deliver this training may improve community engagement, as well as career prospects for individuals' post-release.
4. **Stronger legislative accountability:** Whilst the current legislation, outlined in section *Criminal justice legislation,* provides legal frameworks for addressing discrimination and

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43. Gavin, P. (2019) 'Prison is the worst place a Traveller could be': The experiences of Irish Travellers in prison in England and Wales. *Probation Service. 16* (1).
44. See footnote 22: Office for National Statistics (2021)
45. Gavin, P., Porter, C. N., & MacDonald, F. (2024). A Review of the Healthcare and Social Care Needs of the Older Prisoner Population in England and Wales. S*ocial Sciences, 14*(1), 4.

protecting marginalised groups, the legislation does little to proactively mitigate the occurrence of such incidents. The enforcement of these laws is often inconsistent, with incidents being underreported or inadequately investigated.[46] The legislation, therefore, is viewed by the authors as reactive rather than preventive; rather than addressing the root causes or promoting preventative education, it instead seeks to punish people convicted of crime following an incident. Criminal justice agencies must be held accountable when the legislation fails to achieve its intended impact.

Although these recommendations have been put forward by many official reports and academics, it is vital that feasible and timely responses are provided. Not only will this help to improve levels of trust and confidence between ethnic minority individuals and the CJS, it will also ensure that services are held to account if deadlines are not met. Overall, there is a lot of progress yet to be made and without the support of the policymakers, many of the issues raised will continue — for several more decades.

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46. Clayton, J., Donovan, C., & Macdonald, S. (2016). A critical portrait of hate crime/incident reporting in North East England: The value of statistical data and the politics of recording in an age of austerity. *Geoforum, 75*(1), 68.