

# Hate Crime by the Sea: Operation Columbus

Every summer international students come to Britain's seaside towns to study English. Carol Jones reviews strategies to prevent hate crimes against them.

The murder in 1993 of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent MacPherson Report (1999) highlighted inequalities suffered by black and Asian people in the criminal justice system. The police were found to be wanting in their handling of the murder investigation and the subsequent inquiry found evidence of institutionalised racism within the force, that is, the very agency employed to protect was also an exponent. "In short, the over-victimisation of ethnic minority communities through violent racism in particular is the result of individual action, cultural racism and the indirect impact of structural forces" (Bowling and Phillips, 2002).

Such attitudes are held to influence incidents of antagonism and violence against 'others' by those who subscribe to the ideology of racism. Common to the definition of racism is "the belief that certain groups are innately, biologically, socially, morally superior to other groups, based upon what is attributed to be their racial composition." (Kleg, 1993).

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In an effort to address the apparent shortfall in criminal justice responses to racially motivated incidents, the *Crime and Disorder Act (1998)* introduced racially aggravated offences to the statute book which increased the punitive sentencing for offenders of racially motivated crime. The Act and its emphasis on multi-agency working placed a statutory obligation on the police to record and tackle homophobic and racist incidents in partnership with relevant agencies at a localised level. To this end, the instigation and execution of Operation Columbus has provided a model of partnership working designed to tackle a very specific issue. Here though, the issue is not confined to the inner city but located in resorts that depend, to a significant extent, on international (foreign language) students.

Operation Columbus was an initiative introduced by the Sussex Police in response to an unexpectedly high proportion of racially motivated incidents in Brighton and Hove during the 1990s. Its purpose is to improve the safety and well being of international students who visit the area and who may become the victims of racially motivated incidents or hate crime.

'It is vital that we continue to attract students here. The majority of them hear about Hastings through word of mouth and reputation, but we are fighting a battle with the few who decide to commit a crime against them – be it abuse, theft or aggression. We will not tolerate this kind of behaviour and the council along with the police and the language schools are working together to try and combat this. Overseas students are a vital part of our economy and should be treated as such.' (Hastings on line summer 2001, [www.hastings.gov.uk](http://www.hastings.gov.uk)).

The South of England plays host to many thousands of international students who spend a few weeks in England each summer to learn English at one of the many language schools which exist in several of the south coast towns. They are often under 18 years of age and during their stay routinely live with host families. According to a senior police officer of the Sussex Constabulary who is strategically involved in community policing, evidence showed that during the mid-1990s in seaside towns within the Sussex police division many of

these students were racially harassed and were also often victims of more serious crimes.

Their appearance, demeanour and style of dress as well as the obvious language differences makes international students instant targets of harassment and crime in areas which during the remainder of the year have a relatively low ethnic minority population. In addition they are often easily identifiable by bags displaying the logo of their language school that are given as gifts on arrival. Clearly not all incidents against international students are racially motivated: fraud victimisation, for example, is also a significant problem. However, following the victimisation of international students because of their ethnicity, Operation Columbus provides an appropriate policy response. "In addition to providing crime prevention leaflets to students, helping them reduce the risk of being subject to crime whilst in Sussex, use is made of interpreters and links with local exchange groups to encourage early reporting of any incidents. We have had successful cases and will arrange for witnesses (to travel back to the country) to ensure that persistent offenders do not escape prosecution" (Policing Plan 2002-03 on



[www.sussexpolice.uk](http://www.sussexpolice.uk)).

International students contribute to the economies of the towns they visit and this has stimulated the increased partnership strategy which has developed in Hastings, Brighton and Hove, Torbay and other towns. A student watch scheme supported by local businesses in Hastings further demonstrates the partnership approach as premises offer a safe haven for international students who are victimised.

In one incident, the victim 'Achmed', a Saudi Arabian national, was temporarily in the U.K. studying English. Whilst waiting at the bus stop in 'Sunnytown' he was approached by two persons who threatened and attacked him and demanded money. They stole his wallet and left 'Achmed' suffering cuts, bruises and other injuries. On arrest one of the offenders stated "They deserve it, they should not be in the country."

Racially motivated incidents are more commonly portrayed as inner-city, poor socio-economic phenomena, but Maynard and Read (1997) draw attention to a survey conducted amongst all 43 police forces asking for recorded levels of racially motivated incidents for the previous year. While actual numbers were, unsurprisingly higher in areas of greatest population, the rate of incidents per thousand population provided a very different picture in Dorset (with Bournemouth home to many language schools) which went up from 29th to 8th place. The coastal idylls of Torbay, Bournemouth and Brighton have little in common with the media picture of the typical scenes of hate crime, and the offenders, regularly young males and females, derived from leafy suburbs as well as small council estates.

Operation Columbus was adopted by Devon and Cornwall Constabulary in 1999 and according to data on their web site ([www.devon-cornwall.police.uk](http://www.devon-cornwall.police.uk)), crime against foreign students has since fallen by 30 per cent. Their strategy has been one of partnership, with Youth Liaison Officers visiting language schools, distribution of a video demonstrating crime prevention and cultural awareness issues and police officers visiting the schools to introduce themselves as the approachable face of

British policing. This tactic is particularly valuable for students from countries where the police are feared rather than seen as allies.

Another effective measure has been taken by the police in Bournemouth, where community relations officers produce and distribute 'smart cards' to participating language schools. The cards are easy for students to carry with them, and provide crime prevention information in relevant languages and a contact telephone number.

As the summer of 2002 begins, new waves of international students are arriving in Britain's south coastal towns. While they receive none of the headlines associated with illegal immigrants, asylum seekers or mass immigration, they are still the target of racially motivated hate crimes. Police forces in partnership with language schools, local businesses, social and public agencies are once again preparing to implement strategies designed to reduce incidents of hate-crime-by-the-sea.

*Carol Jones is a research assistant in the Community Justice Research Centre, University of Plymouth.*

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