

# A Sense of Perspective

## Neil Chakraborti and Jon Garland assess minority ethnic communities' views towards crime and criminal justice.

Ascertaining the views of minority ethnic groups is particularly important in light of recent developments which have served to bring issues such as racism, racially motivated offences and public perceptions of the criminal justice system to the forefront of political and social debate. The riots of 2001 in cities such as Bradford, Oldham and Leeds sparked fresh debates regarding relations between minority ethnic communities and the police service; debates which had been re-ignited two years previously by the publication of the Stephen Lawrence Report in 1999, and its conclusion that institutional racism was evident 'both in the Metropolitan Police Service and in other police services and other institutions countrywide' (Macpherson, 1999).

Similarly, there has been official recognition of the need for organisations to proactively challenge racism through the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and of the additional racist dimension that often accompanies crimes committed against people from minority ethnic groups through provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

With regard to minority ethnic groups' experiences of the criminal justice system, criminologists have made frequent reference to evidence of racialised discrimination at various stages of the system, the under-reporting of racist crime and victims' dissatisfaction with their treatment from criminal justice agencies (for example, Virdee, 1995; Fitzgerald and Hale, 1996; Britton, 2000); indeed, a recent study by the Home Office reveals that minority ethnic groups are at greater risk of certain types of crime, are much more likely to perceive a racial dimension in the crimes that they experience, and have low confidence in criminal justice agencies such as the police (Clancy *et al.*, 2001).

It is with these issues in mind that we discuss here the findings of our recent study of Suffolk's minority ethnic communities' attitudes towards crime and criminal justice, drawing upon the views expressed in focus groups, interviews and a questionnaire survey.

### The fear of crime and experiences of victimisation

As previous British Crime Surveys and other localised victim surveys have emphasised, the fear of crime, as well as crime itself, is a very real problem that must be addressed at a national and local level. In addition, such surveys have highlighted the damaging impact of various incivilities, which, although not generally reported to the police, nevertheless cause distress to their victims by reducing quality of life and increasing worry. The present study offered support for such contentions, with minority ethnic respondents expressing high degrees of concern about a wide range of crimes and incivilities, most notably racial harassment and young people loitering, although violent crime was also a concern.

As one focus group participant commented: "I don't think it's safe on the streets anymore, especially for a woman. So if I

wasn't driving then I wouldn't bother taking the bus or walking, I'd stay at home ... Rapes, muggings, stabbings, things like that, everything's going on: it's very very dangerous."

The threat of these problems occurring in their local area was perceived to be a significant issue that needs to be addressed, particularly as respondents felt that minority ethnic groups have more reason to be fearful of crime on account of the additional racist dimension that accompanies, or indeed triggers, many offences. Moreover, the concern about crime and incivilities was illustrated by the finding that respondents would welcome the additional protection of a range of safety measures, with an increased number of police officers on the beat and additional street lighting proving most popular amongst Suffolk's minority ethnic communities. The research also indicated that a significant proportion of Suffolk's minority ethnic population are likely to have experienced criminal victimisation, and quite possibly repeat victimisation.

In highlighting the prevalence of racial harassment and abuse amongst respondents' experiences of crime, the study found that minority ethnic victims often perceive a racial dimension to, or motivation behind, many of the crimes and incivilities suffered. However, in accordance with the findings of previous studies, it would seem that a substantial quantity of racist incidents, together with the incivilities that have such a major impact on people's quality of life, are typically not reported to the police and other organisations, particularly amongst young people.

A common perception was that these were the types of offence that organisations would not take seriously or would be unable to resolve, although the disturbing implication is that many victims may wait for something 'serious' to happen before notifying the relevant authorities.

### Attitudes towards the criminal justice system

Eliciting the views of minority ethnic groups has also revealed a number of concerns about the effective operation of the criminal justice system. Issues such as the unfair treatment afforded to minority ethnic groups by criminal justice agencies, the inability of the system to meet the needs of victims and the ineffectiveness of criminal sentences were all commonly cited as factors which detract from the effectiveness of the system as a whole. Similarly, the under-representation of visible and non-visible minority ethnic communities within the make-up of criminal justice agencies was perceived to be a major problem by respondents, many of whom suggested that contact with people in authority from a similar ethnic background would help to alleviate tensions which currently cloud relations between agencies and minority ethnic communities.

A further perceived difficulty with the criminal justice system related to the lack of visible progress made to address the limitations highlighted by recent well-publicised cases involving minority ethnic victims. A number of people made specific reference to the Stephen Lawrence report, arguing that the system



would show real signs of improvement in the eyes of minority ethnic communities by implementing the recommendations of that report. However, only a third of questionnaire respondents believed that the criminal justice system had improved the way in which it deals with minority ethnic groups in light of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry, which suggests a need not only for greater implementation of the report's recommendations but also for greater communication of how these recommendations have been taken on board.

The agency to whom most criticisms were afforded was the police service, most commonly for its perceived unresponsiveness, resistance to new ideas and lack of understanding about cultural diversity. As one interviewee stated: "The police don't seem to do anything when it's fresh and people would know things. It seems everything is two or three weeks behind and unless there's maybe somebody lying with blood pumping out of them, they don't want to know anything about it."

This opinion was typical of a number of those interviewed. However, the fact that other agencies received less criticism than the police may be partly due to the fact that very few survey respondents had had contact with them; indeed, this lack of knowledge was regarded by many as a further cause for concern, since public perceptions of the criminal justice system as a whole are characterised by a common unawareness of agencies other than the police and are thus commonly based upon second-hand opinions.

### Improving public perceptions

Evidently, a number of steps need to be taken to address the concerns expressed by Suffolk's minority ethnic communities. Lessons can be learnt from the findings of research conducted at both national and local levels, where a number of suggestions have been made with regard to improving the response of the criminal justice system to racially motivated offences, including the provision of more extensive training to police officers regarding the law on racially aggravated offences and the greater employment of restorative methods to deal with low-level racist offending, particularly for young people (Burney and Rose, 2002; Garland and Chakraborti, 2002). Similarly, some of the specific concerns raised by respondents in this study may currently be being addressed, such as the need for greater visibility in policing and improved sensitivity in dealings with the communities. Such measures will undoubtedly help to improve the effectiveness of the criminal justice response, although public attitudes can only be altered if people are aware of improvements being made at both a national and local level. One

of the clearest messages from the study of public attitudes in Suffolk is the need for improved levels of communication between criminal justice agencies and minority ethnic communities. This should be designed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of different agencies, to highlight ways in which agencies can assist victims of all types of crime, and to provide greater reassurances about the system's capacity to take account of the needs of disparate groups. Perhaps most importantly, minority ethnic communities need to know that they can enjoy two-way dialogue with criminal justice agencies and be confident that agencies will listen to and respond to their concerns. As one interviewee stated of their contact with criminal justice agencies:

*"The biggest area [for improvement] from my family's experience of being a victim of crime is to listen to what the victim is actually saying.*

*And I think, unfortunately, 99% of the time people don't actually listen. They hear your voice but they don't actually listen to what you are saying."*

Although years of mistrust, previous negative experiences and the considerable media attention devoted to miscarriages of justice have all served to undermine minority ethnic communities' faith in the criminal justice system, confidence can be restored amongst those most in need of its protection.

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