

# Truth and lies about 'race' and 'crime'

Will McMahon and Rebecca Roberts consider ethnicity, harm and crime.

Periodically, political and media discourse focuses on the myth of 'Black on Black crime', or the supposed threat of young Black men to safety of the presumed law-abiding majority. In 2007, following the fatal shooting of three non-White teenage boys in south London, Prime Minister Tony Blair said 'this is not a metaphor for the state of British society ... it is a specific problem, in a specific criminal culture among specific groups of young people'. In the following April, Blair went further, arguing 'The Black community ... need to be mobilised in denunciation of this gang culture that is killing innocent young Black kids. But we won't stop this by pretending it isn't young Black kids doing it.'

Sections of the media amplified the view that specific communities and cultures were to blame. *The Times* portrayed 'armed police sent out in force on a mission to reclaim the badlands' suggesting imagery of a Black 'hinterland' where 'Black on Black crime' takes place (Tendler and Ford, 2007). *The Independent* (2007) described the areas where the killings took place as 'a swamp' and its editorial noted that 'these latest shootings have fallen under the category of so-called 'Black-on-Black' crime' – and then moved on to a familiar argument – 'it is clear that there is a significant lack of positive role models for young Black boys. Black fathers often play too small a role in the lives of their children. There is also a shortage of Black male teachers. Gangsters and drug dealers often fill the void in the lives of impressionable and angry young men. This dynamic is reinforced by a popular culture that often irresponsibly glorifies criminality, violence and misogyny.'

This construction by both Prime Minister and press of the 'Black community' (whatever that is) having a particular social order problem prompted us to review the evidence base in 2008. Our conclusion being that the 'Black on Black crime problem' was a myth, as was the view that young Black men are a significant source of harm to society; instead we found they are subject to multiple and serious harms because of the society in which they live (McMahon and Roberts, 2008).

## Criminal justice myth making

To begin to understand the contours of public debate about 'Black criminality' we explored a myriad of political speeches, government sources, media coverage and policy reports. We noted a clear tendency for political and media commentators to hone in on 'gangsta rap', gun and knife violence, and drug offences. While caution is exercised in the language used in identifying the locus of the 'problem', there is a common thread: 'Black communities' are said to be experiencing a crisis of poor and single parenting, and under-achievement at school. A lack of aspirations and opportunities for young Black men, and a pervasive negative and harmful culture that results in deprivation, hardship and a consequent high rate of criminality.

This view is re-enforced by the disproportionately high numbers of Black people in prisons in England and Wales. The October 2010 Equality and Human Rights Commission report *How Fair is Britain?* found that the incarceration of Black people is almost seven times higher than their share of the population, compared with, for example, four times greater in the

United States. A convenient myth explanation would be that these incarceration rates are a result of the high rates of unemployment and poverty that are experienced by Black people and more specifically young Black men. One myth, that poverty is the pre-eminent source of harmful or 'criminal' behaviour in society, is weaved in with another myth – that the Black 'community' is more harmful because it experiences greater poverty and deprivation. We question these assumptions and the recurrent presumption that 'young Black men' are a significant source of harm in society.

Research shows that, in its operation, the criminal justice system is often partial and biased – with operational policy tending to emphasise street-based 'crime' in low income areas resulting in more than half of young Black males' records being held on the DNA database. This offers a substantial part of the explanation for the disproportionate numbers of Black, mostly young, men in criminal justice and contributes significantly to an amplification of the belief in a 'Black crime problem'.

Current definitions of crime and the associated activities of the criminal justice system distort and disguise the true range of harms experienced in society. For example, the scope and effects of the social and economic inequalities that Black and ethnic minority people experience extends far wider and much deeper than the homicides and robberies committed by young Black men.

## Punitive interventions

Our 2008 review of the data showed that, beyond the high incarceration rates, many Black males are disproportionately subject to punitive interventions including school exclusions, high rates of stop and search and mental health interventions. Ethnic minority people often experience an additional array of harmful measures inflicted by state institutions in what is claimed to be an attempt to either protect the individuals concerned or the wider community; one recent example being the October 2010 death of

Jimmy Mubenga, a 46-year-old Angolan refugee, who collapsed and died after employees of G4S private security firm put him on to a BA flight at Heathrow, was the result of the operations of the UK Border Agency that is supposed to be 'responsible for securing the UK border and controlling migration in the UK'.

Beyond the immediate physical harms experienced in state institutions, the data also showed that Black people suffered an enduring 'ethnic penalty' that left them at the wrong end of almost every major social indicator. Higher rates of poverty, worse educational outcomes, higher rates of unemployment and homelessness and overall poorer health outcomes, with young Black men experiencing the worst outcomes of all.

### Voluntary services

However, because the policy frame of reference for young Black men is usually to 'reduce crime', public and voluntary services and agencies are encouraged to view and publicise their activities as *crime reduction* initiatives. In many cases, funding and political support is contingent on crime reduction claims and this itself re-inforces the myth that Black communities have a specific 'crime' problem. Haggerty (2008) sums up the process:

*It is poignant to see the following programmes reduced to being elements of crime prevention initiatives: adult basic education, vocational training, drug treatment, improving the self-esteem of disadvantaged youths, homework instruction, academic tutoring, family planning, mentoring, after-school programming (including music lessons, sports, dance and scouts), job training for disadvantaged youths, litter and graffiti removal, midnight basketball, group counseling for students with alcoholic parents and so on. Many proponents of such programmes only started to appeal to the*

*crime reduction potential of their initiatives when they found neo-conservatives were uninterested in arguments that the value of such programmes lies in providing disadvantaged people with hope and the prospect of a meaningful existence.*

Consequently, the social harms that people experience are, once again, transformed into a 'crime' problem of the 'Black community'. Through a 'social harm lens' (Pemberton, 2007), it is possible to understand the over-representation of Black people in criminal justice not as an outcome of a specific problem in the 'Black community' but as the product of socio-economic and historical forces.

The socio-economic positioning of ethnic minority people within British society is not an accident but the historical product of a series of relationships between the colonial empire established by Britain. Davey Smith (2000) suggests that 'the current form of socio-economic disadvantage faced by British ethnic minority communities, in an age when the "reserve army of labour" is waiting to meet labour requirements that currently do not exist, can be understood only in the light of their history'.

### Social harms

Criminal justice cannot help overcome the disproportionate social harms, not only because it is self-evidently the wrong tool for the job, but also because Black people experience it as a source of social harm to them itself. Instead, the challenge is to consider a wide range of social problems without mobilising the Black crime myth as a necessary explanation.

Our claim is not that ethnic minority people are neither victims nor commissioners of acts often defined as 'crime'. What we are saying is that by focusing predominantly on many acts through the narrow framework of criminal justice, there is a tendency to place disproportionate emphasis on particular people and young Black

men and thereby construct a Black crime myth. Policy and political descriptions of the 'crime problem' often conflates 'Black' and 'poor' with criminality and reinforces imagery that equates 'young and Black' with 'criminal'. What is more, the apparent threat to social order posed by the actions of young Black men is given much greater weight than the serious, socially mediated harms faced by some ethnic minorities. Indeed, our point is that every early death or serious harm, whatever the source, is worthy of sober policy, political and social consideration. However, any serious attempt to develop coherent policy responses to the harms affecting Black and ethnic minority people needs to consider a broad range of harms rather than merely fixating narrowly on the 'crime problem'. ■

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**Will McMahon** is Policy Director and **Rebecca Roberts** is Senior Policy Associate at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and co-authors of *Ethnicity, Harm and Crime: A Discussion Paper*.

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