

Re-thinking police race relations

As the Lawrence inquiry unfolds, **Simon Holdaway** examines the complexities inherent in reform.

A bold headline in a recent Observer newspaper described former Detective Superintendent Brian Weedon with clarity - 'He's hopelessly incompetent (better than horribly racist)' (31.5.98.). Weedon was in charge of the investigation of Stephen Lawrence's murder, the 18 year old victim of a racist assault, which is now the subject of a public inquiry. The details of the inquiry are not important here, save that it has already been revealed that myriad mistakes were made by the investigating officers. Police uncertainty and ignorance about legal powers of arrest; ineffective management; insensitivity and, at times, hostility to the Lawrence family and their friends; misunderstanding of what a racial attack is; and so on. The question of whether or not racial discrimination or sheer incompetence guided the officers' action is at the heart of the inquiry. Once again, police race relations is acting as a litmus test for policing generally.

Research difficulties

Difficult research questions arise when we ask if police action is racially discriminatory. The latest Home Office figures suggest that, 'The proportion of black people arrested (out of the total black population) was consistently higher than the proportion of white people arrested in the ten forces considered. The difference between the arrest rates for white and

black people varied from a ratio of four to one in six forces to seven to one. The rate of arrests for Asians was well below that of black people and in one force the same as for white people' (Home Office 1997).

The introduction to these comments, however, qualifies very carefully the limitations of the recorded statistics presented and analysis presented. There is no hint of discrimination, bias or any other differentiation on the criterion of racial identification made about police action in the Home Office report. It is not possible to establish discrimination from the national figures. A sophisticated statistical analysis is needed to substantiate any such claim. Age, area of residence, gender, type of offence, social class, and a host of other variables have to be held constant for each ethnic group if adequate comparisons are to be made and discrimination, usually expressed in terms of statistical significance, established.

A great deal of the criminological research effort about race and criminal justice has therefore been concerned with holding as many variables as possible constant, to measure the extent to

which particular ethnic minorities, the black and Asian minorities mostly, are the subject of police discrimination. Figures for stops, for arrests, for cautions, prosecution decisions, sentencing rates, imprisonment rates and for many other actions have been analysed in this standard, criminological way. (Smith 1997).

There is one basic problem with this type of research, however. It is based on the outcome of police action, not the processes, decisions, reflection, hesitations and certainties, the stereotypes and less rigid categories of thought - the thinking that has led officers to act in what might be a racially discriminatory way. And all these processes must be placed within the framework of the culture of policing, the taken for granted stock of knowledge we now know to guide rank and file, and more senior officers' action (Holdaway 1996; 1997). The statistics of stop and arrest analysed by the Home Office and many criminologists are the end result of a complex moulding of ideas and actions, with many points of reference within and without the police. If police reform is needed we have to understand both the outcomes of police action



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and, in my view more importantly, the culture of policing, the taken for granted, common sense processes, ideas and so on that orient officers’ action.

The bold Observer headline points us towards a false dichotomy. It is not either police incompetence or police racism that need to be considered to understand the policing of ethnic minorities, but both. We have to understand the ways in which routine policing is related to the particular policing of ethnic minorities. When police officers deal with black people in the course of their routine work, they do not move into and work within a world wholly separated from the policing of all other groups. This analytical perspective, however, does not overlook the fact that ethnic minorities may be and at times are the subject of distinctive, racially discriminatory policing.

Mundane processes

If proposals for the reform of the police are not placed within the context of routine policing, if police race relations is understood as a specialism of individuals, of ‘racists’, or of a particular type of policing, of ‘racist policing’, they will fail. They will fail precisely because the mundane processes that lead to racially discriminatory policing are ignored.

I see no clear signs that chief officers have grasped the importance of the occupational culture within their proposals for reform. They refer to ‘canteen culture’, as if rank and file ideas are only relevant to the lowest ranked officers, restricted to the safety of conversations at break time. Policing on the streets is apparently a different realm. Wider notions about programmes of ‘cultural change’ and ‘total quality management’ are floated by chief officers but with inadequate understanding of the ways in which race is articulated in routine policing.

The sharp differentiation of people into pre-conceived categories; the speedy, unreflective use of typical ideas about how offic-

ers should respond to routine situations; stereotypical thinking; and joking and bantering about ‘outsiders’ are the stock in trade of all police work. I have found them all relevant to discrimination inside the police work force, when women, ethnic and officers belonging to other minorities experience marginalisation and exclusion by colleagues (Holdaway 1991; Holdaway and Barron 1997). I have also found them equally relevant to officers’ ideas about and action towards the same minorities within the general population (Holdaway 1996).

The upshot is that there might be similar processes of social exclusion forming the basis of particular forms of discrimination based on ethnic and other criteria, gender, for example. The policing of ethnic minorities is therefore similar to and distinct from the policing of the general population. Discrimination is articulated through taken for granted ways of working, informed by the solid traditions of the police occupational culture. Was Superintendent Weedon ‘hopelessly incompetent or horribly racist’? Neither view is adequate. Police race relations must be placed clearly within the context of routine police work - and reformed. ■

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With a new drugs strategy recently published¹ (see the interview with Keith Hellawell on pp18-20 in this issue of CJM) quite understandably most attention is focused on the future. How will the strategy work? What will its impact be? Before we jump ahead, however, it is as well to focus on the drugs strategy that has just come to an end. What I wish to do here is look at the role of the police and, more particularly, how police anti-drugs strategies were influenced by the strategy that was outlined in the White Paper, *Tackling Drugs Together*². The White Paper, published in May 1995, set out the Government’s plans for tackling drug misuse for the next three years. At its core was a Statement of Purpose:

A promising start

Tim Newburn assesses the success of police anti-drug strategies over the last three years.

To take effective action by vigorous law enforcement, accessible treatment and a new emphasis on education and prevention to:

- Increase the safety of communities from drug-related crime;
- Reduce the acceptability and availability of drugs to young people; and
- Reduce the health risks and other damage related to drug misuse

New research

I have recently completed a study for the Home Office Police Research Group which reviewed the progress the police had made against the general targets set in *Tackling Drugs Together*. The study was divided into two stages.

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The first involved a review of relevant documentary evidence and two postal surveys: one of Chief Constables and one of Drug (and Alcohol) Action Teams (DATS) in England and Wales. The second element in the research was case studies in six forces in England looking at the implementation of anti-drugs strategies on the ground, the ways in which this had been achieved (the creation and maintenance of partnerships), the setting of targets and performance indicators.

The first thing to be said is that the three years since the publication of *Tackling Drugs Together* have seen considerable activity by police forces in England and Wales. All have now published anti-drugs strategies, and many are in the process of producing and publishing revised strategies. In itself this represents considerable progress.

A change of tack

In relation to enforcement, it is clear that in general forces have been broadening their approach, reorienting enforcement activities and balancing them with an emphasis on non-enforcement aspects of drug work. In relation to enforcement itself, there appears to have been a fairly widespread reorienting of practice, away from possession offences and towards

higher level traffickers. In addition, the importance of drugs education and of harm reduction are now clearly recognised by forces, and are linked with enforcement in their work in this area. Forces have responded with some vigour to the idea of multi-agency partnership approaches to drugs and drug-related crime. The police have become a central factor in the work of the majority of Drug Action Teams, and play a full and important part in the work of Drug Reference Groups.

Participation in the new DAT structures and providing drugs prevention work within schools were identified by most forces as the greatest strengths of their drugs strategies. The importance of the former was confirmed by DATS, where it was felt that the police were indeed one of the key players. In relation to education, and to the publication of information about drugs, there remained some scepticism. It appears that as a result of the White Paper and circular guidance the police are now much clearer about their role within school-based drug education. However, some officers and representatives of outside agencies remained unconvinced that the amount of effort and resources committed to these and related informational activities was having much impact.

The areas of greatest concern for forces, in terms of success, were liaison, sharing and planning with Customs and Excise and Regional Crime Squads, and running arrest referral schemes, though there was also criticism of force drugs training in some areas. The inclusion of arrest referral schemes in this list is particularly interesting as it appears that this is one of the areas where the greatest progress is now being made. The study found that over half of the country is now covered by some type of arrest referral scheme. In addition, however, we found that forces that had been running - even for a relatively short time - arrest referral schemes which involve the direct participation of drugs workers (either in the custody suite, or as part of the cautioning or probation programmes) tend to feel that they are working well. Those forces running information-based schemes tend to a less optimistic view.

Barriers to progress

Among the difficulties, resources (or their lack) were frequently cited. This was expressed in many different ways - internal force shortages in terms of cash, staffing, time or training - and external shortages of treatment facilities or resources from other 'partners'. There were also structural problems of force reorganisation and local government reorganisation which were felt to hamper new initiatives. Finally in this regard, many forces suggested that diffi-

culties of assessment and measurement were very problematic. They highlighted the absence of means by which local drugs problems could be measured or assessed, and also the absence of means of assessing the impact of the local initiatives that had been established. With regard to the latter, forces wished to see both the development of independent means of assessment and more subtle performance indicators in relation to drugs work. One of the key absences around the country was anything resembling rigorous evaluation. Whilst many people - in forces, DATS, DRGs and drugs agencies - felt or claimed to be doing innovative work, few were monitoring activities except in relatively superficial ways. The key difficulty resulting from this is that it will make identifying successful practice extremely difficult. It appears that a central clearing house for the dissemination of information about good practice in relation to enforcement, education and harm reduction would be valuable.

A significant amount of progress has been made in the last three years - certainly as far as the police are concerned. During the time of the first strategy the greatest progress was visible in the publication of force strategies, in the development of new structures and through the increased commitment to the idea of partnership. To say that it showed a lot of promise is probably a fair summary. However, given it was an initial three-year strategy, it would probably be unfair to expect too much more. By contrast, it was always going to be the case that much more attention would be paid to the results of any subsequent programme. By announcing a strategy that goes beyond the lifetime of one parliament - and one which includes very specific targets - the Government have ensured that that will be the case.

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Footnotes:

1. *Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain*. Cm 3945. The Stationery Office, April 1998
2. *Tackling Drugs Together*, Lord President *et al.*, 1995