

RADICAL STATISTICS GROUP AGM

Race and Crime Statistics.

Roy Carr-Hill and Dave Drew led a discussion at this meeting. There were three main points in the discussion:

- (i) Where does the emphasis lie in the current debate?
- (ii) What do criminal statistics measure?
- (iii) What have research studies shown?

The first question is the easiest to answer. The carefully planned publication by the Metropolitan Police of a racial breakdown of mugging statistics in February 1982 set the tone of the debate. It put the emphasis on the black offender and ignored other offence categories where black people would undoubtedly be under-represented. This message was seized upon greedily by the National press. Much less publicity was accorded to the Home Office report of November 1981 which showed that black people were 36 times more likely and Asians 50 times more likely to be the victims of a racial attack than white people. The emphasis of this debate should be shifted. There is certainly little emphasis on the number of cases of racial harassment on housing estates, the very few prosecutions for incitement to racial hatred under the 1976 Race Relations Act and the use of stop and search powers by the police against black people.

The question about what criminal statistics measure is a more fundamental one. Criminal statistics do not reflect the level of illegal activity in a community. The statistics are a product of police activity and need interpretation in this light. Statistics are produced at various points in a filter process that begins when a technically indictable offence is committed. Many such offences never become known to the police. The process continues with the reporting of the offence (often by a member of the public), the recording of the offence an arrest being made and conviction and sentencing in the court. Many factors affect the way the process operates, these factors may change over time and may differentially affect different groups within the population. The tendency of the public to report an offence may change. Heavier policing of an area will result in the discovery of more offenders as the case of speeding offences readily shows. Also the counting rules used by the police to record the number of offences that have been committed have changed over time and differed between areas. All these factors make it incredibly difficult to interpret trends in such statistics.

The third question is about the research on race and crime. Very little careful research has in fact been carried out. A study by London (1981) considered cautioning of juveniles in the Metropolitan Police District. When a juvenile is arrested either he/she is charged immediately or the case is referred to the juvenile bureau which reviews the case. The latter is the less severe decision. London investigated the probability of being charged immediately using a logistic model with age, sex, ethnic group, offence

and previous offence behaviour as dependant variables (sample size 1448). Black juveniles had a higher probability of being charged immediately (the more severe decision).

McConville and Baldwin (1982) examined a random sample of cases heard in the Crown Court in London (476) and Birmingham (1000). Black defendants were given on average severer sentences than whites, but when black and white defendants were matched by age, sex, offence type and criminal record the overall differences were not significant. It is not clear from the paper how the matching was carried out.

David Smith (1983) carried out a survey of police and people in London which was commissioned by the Metropolitan Police and combined participant observation methods with a survey of police officers and a survey of Londoners. It was severely critical of the police in a number of respects in particular the racially abusive language which was in common use.

London, S.F. (1981) Juveniles and the Police.
Brit. J. Crim. 21 27-46

McConville, M. and Baldwin, J. (1982) The influence of race on sentencing in England.
Crim. Law Review 652-658

Smith, D.J. and Gray, J. (1983) The Police in action. Police and people in London IV.
Policy Studies Institute No. 621.

Dave Drew.

