Serve and Protect?
Black young people’s experiences of policing in the community

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‘I don’t do nothing now – just let them get on with it.’
Male, 17

‘They just stop you all the time – sometimes two or three times a day.’
Male, 16

‘They don’t take us seriously. If we report racist things they never do anything so why should we help them? I have done some small things and all they want to do is keep on my back. If we need help we’ve got to do it ourselves.’
Male, 18

This report presents the findings of a study undertaken into the experiences of a group of young black people in their encounters with the police. It is the second report in the Children’s Society ‘Just Justice’ research programme which was launched in 2002 and aims to listen to the views of young black people who are involved in the youth justice and criminal justice system in England and Wales.

The Just Justice programme is supported by The Big Lottery Fund (formally The Community Fund) and conducted by the Centre for Criminal Justice Policy and Research at the University of Central England on behalf of The Children’s Society. The three-year programme is ongoing and involves investigations into experiences with the police, community sentencing, custodial care and post custodial treatment. It also includes a ‘tracking study’ of a group of young black people – primarily from Bristol, who are seen to be at risk of involvement with the youth justice system.

The purpose of the research is to provide insight and understanding of the experiences of this particular group
of young people and to assist the voluntary and statutory agencies working with young black people in the community and those who are in danger of involvement in the criminal justice system, to develop strategies for good practice.

The research programme has been specifically designed to provide opportunities for young black people to give voice to their experiences with the various agencies of the youth justice system and the broader criminal justice system. The aim of the research is to listen as young people relate their experiences and describe how they deal with encounters with the individuals and agencies that make up those systems. It allows them to describe in their own words their reactions; their perceptions; the ways in which they adapt their lives to accommodate their encounters and their understanding of the role and function of the various agencies of social control that invariably impact on their lives from time to time. The first report of the series – ‘Playing the Game’ –: The Experiences of Young Black Men in Custody (Wilson and Moore, 2003) – was launched at the House of Commons in December 2003 and material from this study has also since been published in the Howard Journal of Criminal Justice (Wilson, 2003; Wilson, 2004).

This particular study was undertaken during the second half of 2004 and involved interviews with a total of 47 young people who recounted their experiences with the police in Birmingham, London and Manchester. The interviews record some of the complexity inherent in the lives of a group of young, black people and gave them an opportunity to articulate their perceptions of the role and functions of the police service and the ways in which policing impacts upon their lives.

These accounts make depressing reading for they present a view of the world which is far removed from the ideals of community policing which are so often presented as the model which underpins police policy in England and Wales.

In summary this research has found that:

• These young, black people express a lack of trust in policing generally;

• Specifically they paint a picture of conflict and confrontation in their day-to-day dealings with police officers;

• They believe that they are deliberately targeted by the police in the exercise of ‘stop and search’ powers;

• They believe that the police treat them unfairly and that this unfairness is informed by racist stereotypes and prejudice;

• As a consequence they lack confidence in the police and have largely withdrawn from any voluntary involvement with them.

On the one hand these young people perceive themselves to be over-exposed to police regulation in the community and they feel that they are inappropriately stopped and searched and otherwise have their lives disrupted. This leads to hostility and a belief that the police have nothing positive to offer, which in turn leads to reluctance to involve the police when crime is committed against them, or members of their families. In short, the over-exposure leads to a lack of trust and confidence in the police.

Methodology

The focus of the research is young black people and for these purposes ‘young’ has been defined as those under the age of 18 and includes both male and female participants.

The use of the term ‘black’ requires some clarification. In the United States the term ‘black’ was used during the struggle for civil rights in the 1950’s and 60’s and, together with the term ‘black power’, became synonymous with political action to secure democratic rights. According to Stuart Hall, in Britain in the 1960’s, the term ‘black’ was used within the immigrant community to reference the common experience of racism and marginalisation experienced by all post colonial immigrants. It was used to build a sense of identity across ethnic and cultural differences in order to establish a unified resistance to the racist violence experienced in communities and the racism experienced in immigration law and the operation of the criminal justice system (Hall, 1988: 252-3).

In designing the Just Justice research programme the intention has been to be as inclusive as possible and, rather than using some arbitrary criteria to determine who should or should not be included, to allow the young people themselves to decide if they accepted the description ‘black’. When potential participants were approached with a view to taking part however it soon became clear that the term ‘black’ was not universally accepted. It appears that for this group at least Hall’s
post-colonial consensus of the 1960’s has ceased to be meaningful and young people are concerned to express their own ethnic and cultural identity. For example, those from an African-Caribbean or mixed race (African or African-Caribbean and White) background readily accepted the term but strenuously rejected the notion that people of other ethnic origins, such as South Asian or Chinese could be so defined. Young people of South Asian descent were equally resistant and preferred to refer to themselves as ‘Asian’, or more commonly either Indian or Pakistani and, on occasions, as Muslim.

Whilst acknowledging the problematic nature of the term ‘black’ for these young people and the distinctions that they themselves placed on their identity it is necessary to recognise that a perception exists in some non-white sections of the population of England and Wales that their experiences of the criminal justice system are influenced in important ways by their colour, ethnicity and cultural identity. It was important therefore for this research to attempt to gain understanding from a range of different perspectives. As a consequence it was decided to use the term ‘black’ in its unifying sense as described by Hall (op cit) and to follow the work of Beaumont (2000) where ‘black’ is defined as having an ‘inclusive use (intended to be unifying) embracing any person likely to experience racism in British society because of their ‘non-white’ skin colour’ (quoted in Wilson, 2003: 2).

The primary purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of the young people as they described their knowledge and beliefs about the police and, where appropriate, recounted their experiences and perceptions of their encounters with police officers. The principal research tool was therefore the interview. Interviews can take a number of forms - from the highly structured interview schedule, which is little more than a questionnaire administered on a one-to-one basis, to a free flowing unstructured conversation. In this case it was important to ensure that there was a degree of consistency in the way that interviews were conducted and a semi-structured interview format was preferred. This was intended to ensure that common ground was covered in all of the interviews, whilst enabling sufficient flexibility to allow for supplementary questions to explore relevant issues as they arose and to allow the respondents to develop their answers and, where appropriate, to raise additional points. In this way the methodology enables the collection of full and comprehensive answers that are capable of providing a rich source of data.

The voices of young people generally and young black people in particular are not often heard in the public policy discourse or in social science research and it was considered to be important to gain access to groups and individuals who would be able to provide a representative picture of their experiences in dealing with the police.

Two different methods were adopted to contact participants for the programme. The first is known as the ‘Snowball Technique’ where an individual known, or referred to the researcher is asked to identify another person, or persons, who may be willing to take part in the research and a group of participants is built up through this process of personal recommendation. In this case this did not prove to be very successful and only five people were recruited by this means.

The second method used was to make contact with a range of community, church and youth groups and to seek their co-operation with the project. Initially this was a much more successful strategy and the organisers of a range of groups and organisations were enthusiastic in offering support. In the event however it was more difficult to engage the young people themselves who displayed a range of responses which varied between suspicion and even hostility, to simple indifference about any research involving questions about the police and other agencies of youth or criminal justice.

The reasons for the reluctance of young people to participate is beyond the scope of this report, although it is interesting to speculate as to whether their ‘lack of trust and confidence’ in the police could equally be applied to researchers, who have tended, in the past, to promise much, but have delivered little by way of change. As one young participant observed: ‘You know nothing will change, they don’t care about us’ (Male, 17 years).

All of the young people who eventually agreed to take part were given guarantees of anonymity. This has meant that beyond simple descriptions of age and gender no other biographical information is presented and where, for example, specific incidents are described that might potentially identify an individual these have been generalised, or left blank.

A total of 47 young people took part in the study of which 38 were male and nine female. They were aged between 15 and 18 years and none were in stable
relationships. The majority of the males (25) described themselves as black and were from African-Caribbean or mixed race backgrounds. All of the females were African-Caribbean or mixed race. The remaining 13 males were of South Asian heritage and variously described themselves as ‘Muslim’, ‘Indian’ or ‘Pakistani’.

Forty of the 47 participants, including all of the females, lived in the working class and culturally diverse areas of Aston, Lozells or Handsworth in Birmingham; five were from predominantly middle class areas of the West Midlands; and two were from London. All of the interviews were conducted in Birmingham although they relate to encounters in three different police areas, Birmingham, Manchester and London.

Forty of the young people reported a history of disrupted education with only eight having or aspiring to four or more GCSE’s at grade C or above and, of those, four were taking ‘A’ Levels and were intending to continue their studies at University. Nineteen had at some time been excluded from school and 20 admitted to significant incidents of truancy.

Just over half of the group (25) had either a caution or criminal conviction recorded against them, mainly for theft although assault and wounding or possession of drugs also featured. At the time of the interviews five were on bail, one to the Crown Court and three were wearing electronic tags.

It was initially intended that interviews would be conducted on a one to one basis, with the proceedings being tape recorded for later transcription and analysis. However in practice this proved to be difficult. Participants were often prepared to take part in a group discussion and to have the tape recorder running for the duration of the session, but were not willing to take part in an individual interview. In other cases young people were prepared to take part in an individual interview, but were not willing to allow the use of the tape recorder. In these cases the interview had to be recorded contemporaneously in longhand, which invariably had an impact limiting the spontaneity of the exchanges and on occasions the duration of the interview.

All of the interviews were thereafter transcribed, and subjected to detailed analysis.

Findings

The results presented below illustrate something of the experiences of this group of young people and their perceptions of the world that they inhabit. Where necessary their own words are reported directly as they recount their stories providing an authoritative insight into their experiences. While this study does not purport to be representative of the experiences of all young black people in their dealings with the police it does provide some insight into the relationship between the police and this group of young people and the findings of this study confirm or are confirmed by those presented in other published reports.

There is little to be found in this report that will provide comfort for the police and many of the accounts given by these young, black people make depressing reading. Their encounters and the experiences that are recollected present a picture that, almost inevitably, seems to contain an element of conflict, of hostility and of confrontation and it quickly became apparent that these young people have very little positive to say about their contacts, or their experiences, although this is not always the case and there are occasional examples of sympathetic treatment, as the following extracts suggest:

‘My best was when I was arrested by a woman and a man officer and the woman officer talked to me proper. She was gentle in the way she talked and kept asking me if I was alright and told me not to worry because everything would be okay.’

(Female, 17 years)

‘The first time they were okay, they told me I was a silly girl and that they’d have to take me to the station and contact my parents.’

(Female, 16 years)

These two observations are interesting in that they show a markedly different attitude of the officers to the young women concerned than those generally reported elsewhere in this study. Sadly, they are not representative of the experiences of the two young women concerned who later report examples of far less thoughtful and considerate treatment by both male and female officers.

It is perhaps inevitable that the majority of those who agreed to take part felt strongly about their situation and this was sometimes expressed in anger, but what is also revealed is a sense of deep-rooted suspicion of authority figures, with a particular focus on a distrust of the police.
Worse still, these encounters, which contain an element of 'over-exposure' to the police, result in the young people who make up this sample simply discounting the police as a suitable agency to deal with crimes that might be committed against them, or their families. Stated simply this over-exposure to police attention leads directly to a lack of trust and confidence in the police.

The overwhelming criticism of the police revealed here was a belief that most police officers are motivated, to a greater or lesser extent, by racist beliefs. The terms racism and racist are used frequently throughout the interviews and one or both terms are used by all of the respondents at least once. The belief that police officers routinely discriminate against people on the basis of racial stereotypes or prejudice is based, in part, on shared understandings transmitted from within the community but is also reinforced by the experiences of the young people themselves. It clearly informs the young people’s perceptions of their relationships with the police and, to some extent, determines their reactions to police officers although it should be noted that racism was not necessarily experienced directly during each encounter. Thus:

‘They weren’t racist to me but I heard them making comments about a man who they had in one of the cells…he must have been sick because I heard one of them say something about a disgusting Paki being sick or something.’

(Male 16 years)

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how their dealings with the police are perceived by the young people and how they respond, their accounts will be dealt with within the context of the three themes that emerged – Stop and Search, Confidence and Police Attitudes. Taken separately these themes highlight some of the problems and difficulties faced by these young, black people. Taken together they present a considerable challenge to a police service that must re-engage with all sections of the community if it is to succeed in dealing with the problems of crime and disorder on the streets of our towns and cities.

**Stop and Search**

One of the most persistent criticisms of the police relates to the way in which they exercise their powers to stop and search people in the streets. Prior to 1984 such powers were restricted to a number of the larger, urban police forces but were used with particular frequency in London. Although there was no formal monitoring of the use of these powers Bowling and Phillips conclude that there was ‘particularly heavy use of these powers against ethnic minorities, particularly young black people’ (Bowling and Phillips, 2002: 139).

In 1981 serious rioting in London and other major cities prompted an enquiry by Lord Scarman into the circumstances surrounding the disturbances. The subsequent report was highly critical of the police including the way that stop and search powers were being exercised (Scarman, 1982). The Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure that reported in 1981 made recommendations to standardise and regulate police powers, which were subsequently incorporated into the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) which remains one of the principal pieces of legislation governing police powers.

Section 1 of PACE states that a police officer may, without warrant, stop and search any person in any street or public place where there exists reasonable suspicion that that person may have committed or be about to commit an arrestable offence. An arrestable offence is defined as any offence for which conviction could result in a sentence of imprisonment of five years or more.

Reasonable suspicion is not defined under PACE although codes of practice which are issued to provide more detailed guidance state that suspicion must have some objective basis (Home Office, 2004: Code A, 2,2). Other legislation confers similar powers to stop and search suspects – for example The Firearms Act 1968 and The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 – which require that a police officer has ‘reasonable suspicion’ that an offence is being committed, but again this is not defined. In practice however it is the powers under Section 1 of PACE that are most frequently used by the police in their interactions on the streets and which commonly lead to complaints from the public, particularly from the black community.

The Macpherson report into the circumstances and the investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence did not specifically examine the way in which stop and search powers were exercised but it did note that racist stereotyping played a part (Macpherson, 1999, 6.45b) and figures from the Home Office suggest that these powers are being disproportionately used against young, black men (Home Office 2002, 2004). The views of the young people in this study accord with this picture for
their experiences lead them to the belief that the police abuse their powers and target young black people without reasonable suspicion as the following extracts suggest:

‘No, it’s about being black, they say it’s because you’re suspicious with dark clothes and a hood, but the punks [skate boarders] wear hoodies just the same and they don’t get no hassle.’

(Male, 16 years)

[Skate boarding is generally considered to be an activity of white youths.]

‘They just stop you all the time - sometimes two or three times in a day. They just make up a reason, usually it’s drugs sometimes stealing.’

(Male, 16 years)

‘Mostly they don’t bother with girls unless there is a woman police with them but if they want to hassle you they just say they think you have done something and call for a woman and you have to wait for one to come.’

(Female, 16 years)

If the protection of ‘reasonable suspicion’ is ineffective PACE provides an additional safeguard in the requirement that, following a search, the subject should be provided with a form setting out the reason for the search. It is a matter of some concern that on three occasions, relating to two separate police forces, it was reported that the forms were not provided as required.

‘When they finish they sometimes don’t give you the yellow paper so they keep on your back. If they don’t give you the paper you got no evidence so you keep getting stopped and you can’t say harassment. You need the evidence and they don’t give it.’

(Male, 17 years)

‘I’ve never been offered but if you ask they sometimes give it to you but other times they just tell you to fuck off. I don’t argue because they can just keep on your case. They won’t let you alone.’

(Male, 16 years)

Problems with the operation of the powers under section 1 of PACE have been apparent for some time and the Macpherson report (op cit) recommended that the rules should be amended to include all searches including those where the subject consented. In 2001 the Association of Police Authorities found a general agreement amongst the public that the rules should be widened to include voluntary stops and, since April 2005 the requirement to record encounters has been extended to include all cases where a person is stopped and questioned in the street whether they are searched or not. It remains to be seen if this will have any impact on the way in which street encounters are conducted and recorded.

Not all legislation contains the requirement for a police officer to have ‘reasonable suspicion’ that an offence is being committed before a member of the public may be stopped and searched. Under Section 60 of Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 a officer of the rank of Inspector or above may authorise officers to stop and search individuals in a defined area, when it is anticipated that serious violence may occur or that offensive weapons may be being carried. In these circumstances there is no requirement for reasonable suspicion to justify individual searches. There is emerging evidence that the police are increasingly using these powers and concerns have been voiced about possible abuse. Home Office figures indicate that, between 1998 and 2002, 48% of all Section 60 searches were conducted on black or Asian people (quoted in Rowe, 2004: 96). This was certainly a concern of the following young man:

‘They don’t need a reason; if you ask them they just say its section 60. You can’t get nowhere.’

(Male, 17 years)

Indeed, there is a very clear perception amongst these young people that once they have come to the notice of the police for any reason they are considered to be ‘fair game’ for repeated stops and searches in the street.

‘I have been in trouble but they won’t let it go. I am trying to sort it out and get a trade but every time I go on the street they are on me. It’s just what are you up to now……let’s have a look at your bag. I just get sick of it harassing me all the time. I just want to move on.’

(Male, 16 years)

However on other occasions being a stranger to the area is often perceived to be the reason for the stop, as the following extracts reveal:

‘You can’t go nowhere if they recognise you, you get hassle but if you go somewhere new it’s just the same they are still on your case.’

(Male, 17 years)
'My brother is in Manchester at university, last month me and XXXX went up to see him for the weekend. We had just got off the train and were going to the house that he shares and we got stopped. They asked why we were here, they said that they hadn’t seen us around before. It was the first time I had had anything to do with the police and they stopped me for no reason and searched my bag and XXXX’s coat pockets just because we hadn’t been there before. They said it was for drugs but I think it was because we were black, there were lots of other youths around but they picked on us. They didn’t swear or push us around or anything but it was very intimidating they had an aggressive attitude and I felt that if I had complained or objected I might be in trouble.’

(Male, 15 years)

The heightened security situation and fears about terrorist attacks especially in London often only serve to increase the sense of intimidation that surrounds encounters with the police:

‘We were in London I was in a four-by-four with XXXX and my brother and his mate who was driving. We got pulled by a vanload of coppers and I thought they expected we had drugs but then we were surrounded by these cops with machine guns all dressed in black. There was a lot of shouting and they were saying we were Arabs or something. I was scared, you see them on TV with guns but I’ve never seen one close and I didn’t know what was happening. I have had hassle before but it’s usually that they say they suspect I am carrying drugs. They have got no evidence but they say that I have got nice clothes and they want to know where I have got my money from. I get called Paki by most of them especially in London; they just treat you like shit.’

(Male, 17 years)

In his study Wilson (2003, 2004; Wilson and Moore, 2003) describes a strategy which has been adopted by young black men in the penal system in their dealings with prison officers, which he refers to as ‘playing a game’ which involves ‘keeping quiet or going nuts’. He goes on to suggest that similar strategies may be adopted in dealings with other authority figures, including the police. The results of this study do not provide direct evidence to support such a suggestion, especially in relation to ‘going nuts’. However if Wilson’s finding of ‘keeping quiet’ then evidence does emerge in support. Thus, for example, when confronted by the inevitability of an encounter these respondents rarely reported any response other than quiet acceptance of the situation and acknowledged that any hostile or angry reaction could result in arrest and increased inconvenience. Of course the prison environment is very different from that on the outside world and the opportunity for avoidance in a jail, for example, if not entirely absent is extremely limited for people in custody. However, the following extracts reveal that these respondents did also ‘play a game’ using their knowledge of former encounters with the police to develop their strategy:

‘I did struggle and gave them disrespect the first time but they just arrested me and kept me in the police station for hours. I don’t do nothing now, just let them get on with it. They don’t give no respect so I won’t give them none but I don’t argue no more.’

(Male, 17 years)

‘There was this once when I kicked off ‘cos they had to wait for a woman to search me but they just took me in the van to the police station and I had to wait there till she come. When they were finished with me they just let me out but I had no money so I had to walk back. It was about three miles. I don’t do that now.’

(Female, 16 years)

‘I just avoid them. If I see a van in the street or two of them up the road I will try to get away. I hide or sometimes I run but only if they can’t recognise me because they will only come to find me if they recognise me. If there is just one I just carry on normal because they usually don’t do anything when they are on their own but if there is more than one I will avoid them if I can.’

(Male, 17 years)

Confidence

At the most basic level the police can only operate effectively if they have and can maintain the confidence of the public. The police alone cannot prevent or detect crime without the active co-operation of ordinary members of the community. It is therefore essential that they listen when they are presented with evidence that the public have lost that confidence. Yet the evidence from these interviews supports the findings of Home Office research that concludes that confidence in the
police is lower in the ethnic minorities than in white communities (Mayhew et al, 1993). Further support can be found in more recent Home Office studies which have found for example that 16- to 24-year-olds display lower levels of trust generally than older people and that trust in the police and the courts is lower in mixed race and black people (Pennant 2005). The British Crime Survey 2002/3 found that black and mixed race victims were less likely to report crimes than white or other BME groups (Salisbury and Upson, 2004) while a study for the Criminal Justice System Race Unit and the Victims and Confidence Unit reports that there was a lack of confidence in the way that the police dealt with black victims and a belief that they took reports from black victims less seriously than those from white people (Yarrow, 2005: 7-8). Yarrow further found that black male victims were often reluctant to report crime to the police for similar reasons as other victims but, in addition, they cited a lack of respect from the police and police racism (Yarrow op cit: 13-19). The interviews undertaken in this research indicate a similar absence of trust and confidence and an alarming level of cynicism about the willingness of the service to engage with the community to tackle problems. The following extracts are typical and reveal something of the extent of the problem faced by the police:

‘I wouldn’t report anything that happened to me and if a crime was done to my mother I would get my cousin and seek out the ones that did it. The cops are useless anyway.’

(Male, 15 years)

‘Doing a crime to me and mine [my family] is to disrespect me and I wouldn’t ask the police or no one to do nothing because they don’t care about us. I would sort it and teach them.’

(Male, 16 years)

‘They don’t take us seriously. If we report racist things they never do anything so why should I help them. I have done some things and all they want to do is to keep on my back. If we need help we have got to do it ourselves.’

(Male, 18 years)

‘The police don’t protect us, they don’t care what happens the only thing they bothered about is accusing us of doing robberies and stuff so there is no point in telling them you just have to stop it yourself.’

(Male, 15 years)

In all of this there are also echoes of Wilson’s suggestion that young, black men in prison do not simply put up with the racism of the prison, but rather adapt to that racism and develop their own survival strategies. Here what seems to be being described is not an absence of a strategy, but rather a strategy that has absence as its basis. There is a lack of confidence and trust both in terms of who the police are and what they can do – ‘the cops are useless’. In short, the refusal to report a crime and a desire to sort out difficulties themselves without referring to the police is the way that these young, black respondents strategise about crimes committed against them, or their families. Thiers is a strategy that excludes the police – a service that does not inspire trust and confidence, and which is staffed by people who are viewed as racist (see below). After all, as the third respondent makes clear, the failure of the police to do ‘anything’ if they report ‘racist things’ is the background against which they judge the police more broadly. Thus, they look to each other to police their community – ‘if we need help we have got to do it ourselves’. For this group the police quite simply do not provide ‘reassurance’.

Here it should be noted that these views are cumulative – they are based on the day-to-day experiences of these respondents through their inter-relationships with the police and their knowledge of how the police have behaved towards them and other members of their community in the past. Paradoxically, through Stop and Search they feel that they ‘know’ the police better than other sections of the community as they have been ‘over-exposed’ to the police through routine policing.

**Police Attitudes**

The literature on police attitudes and behaviour dates from the late 1960s. It provides an insight into the complexities and contradictions of police work and points to some of the negative attitudes displayed by police officers and the way in which they in turn inform the way in which policing is done. See for example Cain (1973), Smith and Gray (1983), Holdaway (1983), and Waddington (1999).

Reiner’s (2002) characterisation of ‘Cop Culture’ describes a predominantly white male organisation that displays a conservative, cynical, action oriented, inward looking, suspicious approach that is suffused with machismo and racial prejudice.
Despite strenuous efforts over the years to make the police more representative of society at large and to eliminate or modify these negative characteristics the service remains predominantly an occupation of white males. The numbers of female police officers have increased steadily since the passing of sex equality legislation in 1972 and women now make up over 20 per cent of the service but they are mainly restricted to the lower ranks and engaged in uniform patrol work.

There has not been comparable progress in the recruitment and retention of officers from ethnic minority communities, despite a number of high profile initiatives and campaigns and some qualified encouragement in reports of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (1997, 1999, 2000).

Following the publication of the Macpherson report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson op cit) the Home Office set demanding targets for increased recruitment of ethnic minority officers, but recently published figures from the Commission for Racial Equality (2005) point to disappointingly slow progress. This is perhaps not surprising as Stone and Tuffin report in research for the Home Office into the attitudes of members of the Black and Minority Ethnic communities towards careers in the police service there are some deep seated problems:

‘The people who took part in this study came with a series of reservations about the police based on personal experience … They were deeply concerned about racism in the police and a culture that seemed to exclude them … Respondents perceived not only a lack of understanding among the police … but little desire on the part of police service staff to be sensitive to the needs of others.’

(Stone and Tuffin, 2000: 45)

The rationale for the emphasis on the creation of a more representative police service cannot be faulted but even the slow progress that the service has made does not appear to have resulted in any significant improvement in the relationship between the police and these particular young people. In fact the contrary appears to be the case:

‘The women police are all right if they are on their own or even if there are two of them. They will usually talk to you and they don’t give me much grief but it is different when they are with policemen they seem to think they have to be as hard as them.’

(Male, 16 years)

‘If they have to come and search you they can give you a hard time. They probably don’t like being called out but they push you about when there are men police around.’

(Female, 16 years)

‘The black police are the worst they just disrespect you and act hard in front of the other [white] police.’

(Male, 16 years)

‘This Indian cop was sent to my dads shop ‘cos of some trouble there and my dad tried to talk to him in Punjabi because he could explain better but the cop just said “speak English”, all aggressive like. It was like he had to prove he was really a cop not an Indian.’

(Male, 17 years)

‘I was brought up to respect the police and I used to talk to them when I was small and they came to school but not now, since I got into trouble they treat me badly they don’t give me any chance.’

(Male, 16 years)

Conclusions

It is clear from these accounts that the treatment of young black people by the police continues to raise concerns, for whilst this study does not purport to be representative of the experiences of all young black people, what is revealed here is consistent with other research findings – for example, Holdaway (1983), Bowling (1999), Bowling and Phillips (2002), and Box (2004). Allegations about police racism are common in the literature and, as Stone and Tuffin report:

‘…the terms police culture and racism were used by respondents in the focus groups. These terms arose spontaneously, they were not the result of specific questions asked.’

(Stone and Tuffin, 2000: 7)

They further found that both black and Asian women were anxious about being subjected to both sexism and racism if they joined the service, a conclusion which is not altogether surprising given the experiences recounted by the young people in this research.

Sadly, what emerges here is a picture of encounters that contain elements of conflict, hostility and confrontation. The police as guardians of law and order are absent from the lives of these young, black people who believe that they are targeted as a result of prejudice and stereotypes
that characterise them as potential sources of crime and anti-social behaviour. If these findings are truly representative of the views and experiences of young black people they present a serious challenge to two recently introduced themes in policing policy – Reassurance Policing and Policing Diversity.

Reassurance policing describes attempts by the police service to address the decline in public confidence in their abilities generally at a time when there is an increasing fear of crime – despite a consistent trend of falling crime rates. To quote Carol Willis, the Assistant Director of the Home Office Crime Reduction and Community Safety Group, in a foreword to an evaluation of Reassurance Policing projects in the Thames Valley Police Area:

"Reassuring the public has become a central part of police reform. Working with communities to reduce their concern about crime and disorder is as important as bringing down the actual level of crime and disorder prevalent in neighbourhoods."

(Singer, 2004: 1)

The interviews described here reveal an almost complete lack of confidence amongst this sample of young people. On the evidence presented one is forced to ask who exactly is being ‘reassured’ because it is certainly not these young people. Indeed they perceive themselves to be the focus of a service that regards them only as problems and as potential or persistent criminals. Their experiences have led them to reject any notion that they have value, save that which they derive from their own peer group.

The term Policing Diversity has emerged since the publication of the Macpherson Report (op cit) into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and is increasingly being used by police forces, policy makers, commentators and occasionally the media throughout England and Wales to describe attempts by the police service to come to terms with the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nature of society. In one sense the adoption of the term may be seen as the police attempting to re-engage with all sections of society in the spirit of community policing. In another it can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that the efforts of the past to provide value free policing to all sections of the community have failed and that in order to re-establish trust, the police must recognise and respond effectively to the differing needs and expectations of a diverse population.

The challenge then for the service is to demonstrate that it is sensitive to differing priorities and able to respond in an appropriate fashion. At the same time Policing Diversity has to be about more than recognising that policing should be sensitive to the communities that are being policed, it must also signal an awareness that the composition of the police service must be more representative of a culturally diverse population and that extra efforts are required to encourage members of minority communities to become police officers. However in the eyes of the young people who are given voice in this report, it is singularly failing to rise to these challenges.

The problem here is for the police to respond to the findings of this and other reports in order to re-establish trust and confidence in the community. Quite simply the police have an image that has moved from one of being ‘the best police force in the world’, to one that has become tarnished by allegations and the realities of racism, discrimination and unfairness. If the police are truly to serve the needs of the community as a whole they must be representative of that community – young and old, black and white, and they must respond effectively and efficiently to problems and priorities as they emerge. That means that they must engage in meaningful dialogue with all sections of society to establish trust. They must be seen as a service responsive to the legitimate demands of all sections of the public and open to all as a worthwhile career choice.

The black and minority ethnic young people interviewed for this research generally lacked trust in the police service, and this indicates something of the depth of the problem facing the police if they are to re-establish trust with these communities. What this study illustrates is the difficulty that the service is facing in its relationship with young, black people. The evidence presented here confirm other findings of a lack of trust and confidence in a service that relies upon the good will of the public to perform its role effectively. What is more they indicate something of the depth of these negative feelings.

Amongst these young, black people there appears to be a firm belief that the police service has nothing to offer to them, or to their communities. Not only do these young, black people avoid contact with the police on the streets, they decline to have any contact at all. They will choose not to report crime - even if it has an immediate impact on their own families and they will not voluntarily provide information to the police investigating even serious crime.
These research findings should give the Home Office, and the leaders of the police service, pause for thought. Since the 1970s policies have been formulated, police training has been reviewed and the law has been changed to codify and clarify police powers. The exercise of police powers is subject to more monitoring than at any time in the past and data is collected regularly on the use of the powers to stop and search people in the streets. Yet despite all of this the evidence presented here is clear. Young men and women from minority communities have lost trust or confidence in the police and it will take many years and considerable effort to rebuild it. That is the challenge for the police service.

References


The views expressed in this report are the author’s and do not necessarily reflect those of The Children’s Society or the funder.