

Black men and crime: understanding the issues and finding solutions

18 August 2005 Deborah Gabriel

The criminalization of blacks in the media

In the first of our feature articles designed to allow for in-depth analysis of topical issues, we introduce you to black criminologist Martin Glynn who shares some of his theories on black criminality. We also talk to ex-offenders Paul Moore and Winston Silcott and hear how the community played a role in helping them to turn their lives around.

In order to understand black criminality one must first look at factors that influence the perception of black crime within society that has been largely influenced by the media. For as long as there has been a black presence in Britain, black men in particular, have been demonised by the media.

Part of the problem with the mainstream press is that they do not willingly cover stories about black issues unless it happens to be negative.

Therefore, the constant stream of sensational stories that have appeared in our tabloids and broadsheets have tended to focus on black men and crime.

No other race can claim to be repeatedly linked to a crime that does not exist. There is no such crime as 'mugging' either under common law or statutory law.

The so-called crime of mugging is defined as a type of robbery which appears in national crime statistics under that category.

The Daily Mirror first used the phrase 'mugging' in August 1972 and in 1995, the then Police Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon claimed that between 70 and 80 per cent of muggings were committed by black youths.

However, as the Socialist Review reported in 1995, the Commissioner failed to reveal that the survey on which his claims were based only covered 20 out of 62 police divisions in London where victims had described their attacker as black.

Unfortunately, this has not stopped the police from continuing to associate black people with 'muggings' as in October 2002, Sir Ian Blair, who was then Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police was quoted by the Evening Standard as saying: **"most muggers are black"**.

As the Socialist Review reported in 1995, Criminologist Professor Jock Young pointed out that: **"Street robbery is ...likely to be committed by the poorest people.**

While they are likely to be black in London, they will almost certainly be white in Newcastle."

Another method used to link black people to crime is the way in which the media refers to a person's race in a news story when the criminal is black, but do not refer to a person's race when the criminal is white.

Therefore the repeated use of this technique has the resulting effect of associating black people with criminal behaviour.

More often than not, if a black person is a victim of crime by a white person, the suspect is not referred to immediately as 'white' but the crime is labelled as a 'race crime', such as in the recent

case of 18-year old Anthony Walker who was hacked to death by white attackers.

The point to note here is that race crimes are presented as incidents that occur randomly. Neither the police nor the media have ever made reference to a systematic pattern of violence against black people perpetrated by whites.

The Commission for Racial Equality, who is supposed to serve the interests of black communities, does not see fit to challenge the media for the way they have perpetuated these stereotypes.

Instead, on their website under 'Guidance for Journalists' on reporting race issues, they make recommendations for reporting on travellers and gypsies but there are no specific recommendations for reporting on black people in relation to crime stories.

The criminal justice system is not impartial

In order to fully appreciate why prisons are disproportionately full of black men, one must first be aware that the justice system that puts them there is not impartial.

Institutional racism exists within police forces and within the criminal justice system and this fact must be taken on board when looking at the area of black criminality.

Home Office Statistics within the Race and Criminal Justice Report 2004 notes that in 2003/2004 black people were 6.4 times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people, which rose from the previous year.

Furthermore, although black people only make up 2.8 per cent of the population nationally, they accounted for 9% of arrests for notifiable offences in 2003/2004.

The report states: "**Relative to the general population, black people were over 3 times more likely to be arrested than white people.**"

The same report shows that in 2003/2004 black inmates accounted for 15.5% of the prison population in England and Wales.

Breaking this figure down by gender, in 2003 16% of male prisoners were black, a figure that has risen steadily from 11.8% in 1998.

However, 8% of all complaints made against the police in 2003/2004 were from black people.

It must also be noted that black communities are under-represented within criminal justice agencies as police and prison officers as well as in prison governor grades.

There are currently no black high court judges and just 6 out of 565 circuit court judges are from ethnic minorities.

Black criminologist Martin Glynn has a masters degree in criminology coupled with 20 years experience as a practitioner working with offenders.

During this time he has worked as a consultant on a variety of projects with different prison services across the country including Manchester and West Midlands.

This has involved working in all categories of prisons and coordinating a variety of different

workshops including one centred on gun crime and gang affiliation.

He told Black Britain that the government policy that frames the area of criminality is problematic, adding that some criminologists take an anthropological approach when looking at criminality:

“What is needed is an African-centred perspective when it comes to looking at black criminality”, he said.

Why some black men are able to desist from crime

Speaking exclusively with Black Britain Mr Glynn said: **“Basically, there are a range of different motivations that keep people from returning to crime.”**

Referred to by criminologists as ‘desistance’, this area of criminology looks to explain what influences people to stop committing crimes.

Mr Glynn explained: **“For black people, desisting from crime is compounded by a range of other factors because for a lot of black people crime operates on a range of levels.”**

Citing enhanced status within the community as one of the factors Mr Glynn said:

“A bad man in the community can develop a massive reputation on the basis of his criminal activities, increasing the motivation to commit crimes.”

Furthermore, many of today’s black youths **“are growing up in a bling culture where many of them want to be self-determined without going through the conventional routes.”**

According Mr Glynn, who has known ex-male offenders who have successfully managed to desist from crime, for some it is a partner or children, for others who have found a new vocation it is the chance to fulfil an ambition.

During the many years of his experience working with offenders, Mr Glynn has observed:

“A man in prison thinks better and improves his critical analysis. But what happens is that when he comes out into the community it doesn’t recognise his change.”

Therefore, says Mr Glynn: **“The moment he steps back into the community, it is so punitive that he returns to a life of crime.”**

Mr Glynn continued:

“We never reward the ten prisoners who’ve been out for ten years or the three prisoners who’ve set up a business and have employed ex-offenders”

Instead the black communities are all too easily placated with politicians’ claims that they are reducing crime:

“Because we live in a community that only cares about people coming off the streets, we don’t really pay attention to the prison population.”

What can be achieved when the community pulls together

The Peace Alliance is a voluntary organisation based in North London working to reduce crime and

promote peace within the community.

Funded by the Home Office on a year-by-year basis, the Inside Out project aims to deter young people aged between 11 and 18 from crime by focusing on its consequences, using both victims of crimes and ex-offenders to get the message across.

Project co-ordinator Keno Ogbo told Black Britain that in her experience, crime affects black communities most **“where there are a lack of role models in the community”**, compounded by other factors such as poverty, deprivation, poor housing and the failure of the education system.

“I think it’s very important to realise that a lot of black men need to know who they are and understand themselves in the context of history, in order for them to be able to embrace education.

Most youths that I have come across who dropped out of school said that they couldn’t find confidence and self esteem as a black person within the education system.”

Referring to the lack of positive role models, Ms Ogbo said:

“A lot of the time on the housing estates I hear young people saying that the guy that they look up to has the car and the girls, we know he’s doing this and that but he’s our man and he understands where we’re coming from.”

Part of the Inside Out project involves black professionals going into schools to tell young people how they made it through the education system to become successful.

The objective is to demonstrate that black people can be lawyers and stockbrokers and to provide positive role models.

Another effective aspect of the scheme is the use of ex-offenders to educate young people on the dangers of getting involved in crime.

Ms Ogbo said: **“At the Peace Alliance we set out to change mindsets. We want people to think differently about themselves and to re-establish a sense of hope and self-esteem.”**

The Peace Alliance works with different community organisations acting as a bridge between the police, the community and ex-offenders, getting people to work together.

"One of the key things about what we do in the Peace Alliance is that we don’t just pay lip service, we actually believe in people and we believe that we can make a positive change and we work with them."

Ex-offenders who have made it – Winston Silcott

Forty-four year-old Winston Silcott embodies all of the key issues surrounding black criminality that have been covered in this article thus far.

He has been demonised in the media, he has been the victim of an unfair and institutionally racist justice system and the community that he lives in has played a key role in his integration back into society.

Being convicted and subsequently found to be innocent of the murder of PC Keith Blakelock which happened almost twenty years ago and serving 18 years for the murder of a boxer, which he claims

was in self-defence have shaped the person Winston Silcott is today.

He would probably be the first to agree with criminologist Martin Glynn, that both his thinking and critical analysis are much sharper and more improved.

Mr Silcott told Black Britain that he found it hard to integrate into prison life: **“Because I didn’t feel I should have been there and therefore, getting involved in any activities would be like admitting that I belonged there.”**

Instead, he said: **“I drew my inspiration from Nelson Mandela, because I knew that like me, he was convicted of a crime he didn’t commit.**

He came out a free man with his head held high, showing dignity and inner strength. To me he is a great man and I looked upon him as a role model.”

Unlike other ex-offenders, Mr Silcott received **“tremendous support”**, both from family members, long-term friends, people in the community and all over the country.

At the same time, Mr Silcott noted that he had become something of an icon for misguided youths who looked up to him: **“as a hard black man just out of prison, back on the streets after serving time. I soon put them straight”**, he said.

As the end of Mr Silcott’s prison sentence approached, he was required to attend a programme to facilitate his re-integration into society.

Asking to be placed near his hometown of Tottenham, a friend put him in contact with the Peace Alliance, where at first on day release, he learnt basic skills such as filing, office administration and how to use computers.

Now Mr Silcott works with the Inside Out project, addressing the issues of street crime and anti-social behaviour and making youths aware of the negative consequences of crime.

He told Black Britain: **“I’m glad that I’m able to reach some of the youths and talk common sense to them.**

My aim is to help to break the cycle of crime for them. Some young people do petty things when they’re young and eventually grow out of it.

But I’ve seen here in Tottenham where you have generations of youths where the big man is supposed to be the gangster and his son follows in his footsteps and tries to outdo the dad.”

Mr Silcott believes that black communities must take more collective responsibility for the actions of its young people:

“That means if someone is straying onto the wrong path, there needs to be someone there to pull them up and give them guidance, direction and leadership.”

Ex-Offenders who have made it: Paul Moore

At twenty-three, Paul Moore is almost half the age of Winston Silcott, but whilst there is a disparity in their ages, their work at the Peace Alliance and support from the community are both things they have in common.

Mr Moore told Black Britain: **“The reason I got involved in crime is because my father wasn’t there, it was just my mum.**

I was surrounded by the wrong people and mixed up in the wrong crowd and therefore I got involved in various things.”

Speaking of his experience in prison, Mr Moore said: **“Being incarcerated for a long time changed my way of thinking. It opened my eyes. I said to myself, what am I doing in here? I felt low, I felt ashamed and I felt embarrassed.”**

Seeing so many other black men inside prison was a shock to the system:

“At one time when I looked at it, I was sad man. I said to myself there are so many black people in here.

Many people have lost lives out here in Tottenham. Many people have been knifed up. When I went to jail it was like a reunion. The people I hadn’t seen for a long time were all in there.”

Mr Moore told Black Britain that he did not want to bring the same mentality from street life into prison and determined that he would use his time constructively:

“When I was inside I educated myself: I read a law book, did a mechanics course, a brick-laying course, a maths course and English. I did a lot of things to occupy my time.”

Referring to his current work with the Peace Alliance speaking to youths, Mr Moore said:

“My message is just to try and tell young kids to think ahead and think of the consequences before you pick up any weapons.

I’m just trying to make a difference by telling these youths to put their heads in their school books before it’s too late. Prison is mental slavery, it’s a trap.

What I want them to see is that I’ve changed and if I can change they can too.”

Describing his delivery style as a direct approach, Mr Moore said that he gives his audience two choices: prison or death, as these are the realities of falling into the crime trap.

Looking to the future, he is keen to get more involved in community work, but would prefer to move out of Tottenham, describing it as a challenging area in which to live. But this does not deter his firm resolve to have a better future.

Reflecting on his new philosophy, Mr Moore said:

“Live life in the right way and always try and help people, because what goes around comes around. I want to rise up and be a person that people look up to.”

PRINTED WITH KIND PERMISSION AT: www.iamcolourful.com