

Guns and Gangstas Part Two: A criminologist's perspective

25 September 2005 Deborah Gabriel

Placing crime in an historical context

According to criminologist Martin Glynn, who has over 20 years experience of dealing with ex-offenders, the issue of black on black crime is a complex one:

“So the first thing to say is that the context to criminality did not start with black youths.”

Black youths didn't just arrive at behaving badly, because if you go back to the 18th century and examine the work of Charles Dickens:

“In the novel Oliver Twist we have Fagin, Bill Sykes and a group of young thieves on a street level, so Charles Dickens was writing about street robbery.”

Even in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, there are two warring families **“who in some respects are like gangs.”**

Historically when people are oppressed they will resort to certain types of behaviour. Looking at the history of oppression of black people one could argue that our way of dealing with it is to behave in an anti-social way, which constitutes breaking the law.

However, Martin Glynn says that is debatable **“as we have seen in New Orleans. So our black people who are starving who are breaking into a shop to get food for their families; are they looters or are they people who are just responding to what you would do if you are poor?”**

The criminologist told Black Britain that in order to understand black criminality it is necessary to deconstruct history and the way in which we have been raised.

“So if you look at the prison population, if you look at the psychology of disaffection and the politics of how Margaret Thatcher destroyed notions of community, if you look at the demise of Rasta, replaced with hip hop”, then we might begin to see some answers.

The problems with labels

Martin Glynn told Black Britain that as a criminologist, one of the questions he always raises is:

“What do we mean by black on black crime and why is it described as black on black crime when the context of white people killing each other is never described in those terms?” ,

He went on to explain that such labels carry a range of perceptions and judgements with them.

Therefore the notion of black on black crime is promoted as more severe than any other forms of crime.

However, he said: **“Sometimes we need to question how those terms are defined and applied.”**

Referring to Stanley Cohen's *moral panic* theory, Mr Glynn uses the term **‘suicide bombers’** as an example to demonstrate how fear and hysteria can be whipped up when labels are used.

“So the way that the media have portrayed the bombers puts the rest of the country on red

alert, creating fear and panic.”

Commenting on the BBC series ‘Murder Blues’ Mr Glynn said that the programme only shows one half of the picture as it shows the State’s response to handling an area of black criminality:

“But what it doesn’t do is to seek to explain the factors that lead people to [commit violent crimes] in the first place.”

According to the black American author and psychiatrist, Dr Amos Wilson, we need to analyse the structural ways in which black criminality is brought into the public domain.

Martin Glynn told Black Britain: **“We perceive black on black crime in a very limited way. What about domestic violence and child abuse? Is that referred to as black on black crime?”**

Therefore when we think of black on black crime, we do not think about middle class black people who commit fraud, we think of disaffected young black men who are going out there shooting, robbing and mugging.

Mr Glynn argues that by using the label black on black crime within the structure that has been used to bring the phenomenon into the public domain, the effect it has is to criminalise a whole generation of young black men between the ages of 14 and 25.

He told Black Britain: **“For me the term black on black crime limits the understanding of what crimes we commit.”**

Current perspectives on crime distort reality

According to Martin Glynn, social scientists are falling over themselves trying to explain the phenomenon of black on black crime:

“But as I have learnt, a lot of people who try to explain black criminality explain it from a distance.”

With young black men constantly being portrayed as the main perpetrators of gun crime, it sets up notions that this section of the community perpetuates this type of crime.

But Mr Glynn told Black Britain that Hungerford and Dunblane:

“Two of the biggest mass shootings in the UK ever and they were not perpetuated by black people. Those were perpetuated by white people.”

He said that looking at crime from a Eurocentric perspective, therefore distorts reality.

When we look at crime generally we are often looking at behaviour that is motivated by status and the acquisition of wealth.

However, many of the crimes committed within the black community are about respect:

“This means that on a deeper level some black people feel they have less status within a society that excludes them”, therefore, they have created their own social groups outside the mainstream.

Mr Glynn explained that there are layers of superiority within our community, in terms of class and those with knowledge, information and resources are in a better position in terms of achieving

things than other black people.

However, in reality: **“Both the black middle class and the youths on the street are both striving to cope with living in a white society. So we cannot walk around in a false consciousness.”**

On a street level the power balance changes as the rules are very different. Mr Glynn told Black Britain that within society young black men are constantly being defined in terms of white men's perspectives, which is about power and control and whoever has the power controls:

“What the black youths are saying on a street level is: we may not be able to control what's happening in education, we may not be able to control what's happening in the economy, but we can control the streets.”

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