

Why Jamaicans are over-represented in British Prisons

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By Deborah Gabriel

Last week when the Prison Reform Trust released a report called the **Bromley Briefings Factfile**, revealing a 25,000 increase in the UK prison population over the last 10 years, few paused to think about the disproportionately large number of black prisoners that make up the prison population of over 70,000.

The UK has become the lock-up capital of Europe, having the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe, incarcerating people at the rate of 143 per every 100,000. But the dilemmas being pondered are what is to be done with all the extra prisoners rather than what is causing them to be in there in the first place.

But the race factor has not escaped the government's attention as the House of Commons recently announced an enquiry into young black people and the criminal justice system. However, Black Britain decided to search for its own answers with the help of Britain's leading black criminologist, Professor Ben Bowling, Director of Criminological Studies at the School of Law at King's College, London.

Firstly, the figures in question which Black Britain used for analysis are based on Home Office statistics for England and Wales as at September 2005. This is because analysis of prison populations by race and nationality are only produced on a quarterly basis.

Therefore, as at September 2005, black men and women accounted for almost 15 per cent of the prison population, when they only make up 2 per cent of the population in the UK (2001 Census).

But just over a third of that figure is made up of black prisoners from overseas. If we look specifically at black British prisoners, then they actually account for 8.9 per cent of all prisoners in the UK. This is still disproportionate to the black British population. It is when we examine the number of black foreign prisoners that we see they make up 5.63 per cent of the UK prison population – over one third of all black prisoners locked up in Britain.

Prisoners from the African continent account for just 3.51 per cent of the total UK prison population – when you consider the estimated population of Africa is over 887,000,000 (CIA World Factbook 2004-2005), that figure is negligible.

When you look at the Caribbean, this is where a picture emerges. Prisoners from the Caribbean make up 2.51 per cent of the total prison population, but **Jamaicans account for 84% of all Caribbean prisoners in the UK.**

To put this into perspective – the population of Africa is 887,000,000 and there are just 2720 African prisoners incarcerated in the UK. The population of Jamaica is just 2.7 million but as at September 2005 there were 1633 Jamaican prisoners in the UK.

Organised crime groups use poor Jamaicans as drugs couriers

A tiny island of just 2.7 million people, yet last year 1669 homicides gave Jamaica the third highest per capita murder rate in the world, behind South Africa and Colombia.

Professor Bowling told Black Britain that the Jamaican prisoners currently serving time in

the UK are mostly drugs couriers who are arrested coming into the UK.

This is because "by an accident of Geography", the Caribbean lies directly between the major cocaine-producing countries – Colombia, Bolivia and Peru and the main drug-consuming countries of North America and Western Europe.

He said: "The organised crime groups are using typically poor, rural West Indians as drugs couriers. The illegal drugs market creates huge opportunities for organised crime groups to pay modest amounts of money to move the drugs around."

Professor Bowling explained that other reasons people get involved in drugs is because of debts: "They find themselves in debt, they go to the don, borrow a bit of money and the don says 'you owe me a favour.'"

In recent years, cocaine-swallowing smuggling from Jamaica has declined because of targeting and largely due to an initiative by HM Customs and Excise (C & E) known as Operation Airbridge, a UK-Jamaica partnership which uses drugs-detecting technology at airports to intercept smugglers.

In 2004 C&E reported a 90 per cent reduction in the number of cocaine smugglers detected in the UK and a large increase in the number of smugglers caught in Jamaica before boarding flights to the UK.

But according to Professor Bowling, cocaine is more widely available and the number of people using it is not declining, therefore: "Wherever there is a market the drugs will flow and the bottom line is that cocaine is cheaper today than it was 20 years ago... where there is a market there will be people willing to supply it."

He stressed that there is a myth that taking out a small number of "Mr Bigs" will solve the problem, but in reality even the "Mr Bigs" of this world are "replaceable" and the couriers are "utterly dispensable."

In terms of drugs supply, Professor Bowling told Black Britain there is a "significant relationship" with Jamaican organised crime. Research on garrison communities where 99 per cent of people in a particular neighbourhood will vote for one political party suggest: "There is a definite link between the political machine and the organised crime machine."

Cocaine would still find its way into the UK without Jamaicans

But despite this, Professor Bowling believes that it is not Jamaicans fuelling the drugs market but the countries from which cocaine originates. He said: "Even if you took out the whole of Jamaican organised crime, cocaine would still be coming into England," pointing out that both Venezuela and Guyana have had shipments of timber, rice, sugar and fish filled with cocaine.

He referred to the 40 tonnes of cocaine seized in Spain last year en route from South America via Africa. Professor Bowling told Black Britain: "I honestly believe that if you took out the entirety of the Jamaican route it would have minimal impact on the availability of cocaine."

Olga Heaven is the Founder and Director of Hibiscus, an offshoot of the Foreign Prisoners Welfare Project which was set up in 1990s to cater for the special needs of foreign prisoners.

Speaking to Black Britain she agreed with Professor Bowling on the reasons why Jamaicans find themselves involved in the drug trade: "A lot of effort has been put into deterring the shipment of cocaine from Jamaica but my philosophy is that wherever there is poverty there will always be drug mules."

When Jamaicans have served their full sentences in the UK they are released and deported back to a country which does not have the resources to deal with them. Professor Bowling told Black Britain: "The Jamaican criminal justice system is in crisis. The courts are in crisis – everything has ground to a halt"

There is even talk of the UK Government funding the building of prisons in Jamaica to house prisoners on their return. Professor Bowling described the situation in Jamaica as "pretty critical," saying it is a major issue that has "got much worse."

But he added that despite the prison statistics there are signs of serious crime problems in Trinidad, Guyana and St Lucia who are now being used as alternative routes for the shipment of cocaine, along with Nigeria, which has also seen an increase in cocaine smuggling.

In last September's issue of the Prison Reform Trust magazine, Heaven wrote: "As long as the Columbians produce cocaine and there are poor countries like Jamaica and Nigeria, the trade will continue. But if Europeans and Americans stopped consuming the product Columbians would lose the incentive to make it and poor Jamaicans, Nigerians and Trinidadians to sell it."

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