

Special Report: White supremacy and the truth about black youth crime in Britain

18 June 2007 Deborah Gabriel

All the evidence points to institutionalized racism - white supremacy by another name

In April 2006 when I wrote a feature for Black Britain about the over-representation of Jamaicans in British prisons, a little bird told me that the government was conducting research into the “phenomenon” of black youth crime. Back in 2005, I wrote several in-depth articles trying to explain the issues surrounding crime and the black community and interviewed ex offenders, youth workers and respected criminologists in the process, which helped to build a picture of the reality of the situation, as opposed to the reactionary and distorted picture that is portrayed through the mainstream media.

Armed with this knowledge and experience; after examining the Home Affairs Committee report and having conducted more interviews with experts on their own responses to that research; I am prepared to state openly that the experience of young black people within the British criminal justice system and in the wider society is influenced to a large degree by the system of white supremacy that operates in Britain.

Let me be clear that when I use the term “white supremacy” that **I am referring to the structured and systemized forms of discrimination, and racial disadvantage that are brought to bear, sub-consciously or intentionally upon people of African descent, which at the same time confers privilege and advantage to individuals racialised as white.** Before I explain how this works in relation to crime and young black people, I must first state that I welcome that the Home Affairs Committee report does acknowledge that the incidence of black youth crime *must be put into perspective.*

For example, it is a reality that in 2004 to 2005, 84.7 per cent of the offences committed by young people aged between 10 and 17 were committed by young white persons. The Home Affairs Committee report states that concerns arise when faced with the fact that despite a minority of black youth being involved in criminal activity, they are nonetheless severely over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system.

Whilst young black people only make up 2.7 per cent of British youths aged between 10 and 17, they account for 8.5 per cent of all arrests. When we examine the disproportionate targeting of black communities by police, that figure should come as no surprise. Black people of all ages are six times more likely to be arrested than white people and six times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police.

As the Committee acknowledges, young black people are over-represented in arrests and convictions for certain types of crime; especially robbery and drugs offences, despite the fact that there are lower drug usage levels among young black people. So what we are seeing here is a system of criminal justice that confers privilege amongst white Britons – because they are less likely to be stopped and searched and less likely to be arrested – which discriminates against people of African descent. That is the first proof of white supremacy at work.

Dr Perry Stanislas, a Senior Lecturer in Policing, Community and Criminal Justice at Leicester de Montfort University, told Black Britain that the issue of institutionalised racism in Britain in respect of criminal justice was raised in the Mc Pherson Inquiry, but he believes that it was “**fudged.**” He argues that it was clear that recommendations should have been made back then to curtail the actions of the police, who sub-consciously or intentionally target black communities:

“There is a mountain of authoritative, highly regarded academic and other research which shows historically that there is a clear pattern of police discriminating both consciously and through informal institutional practice.”

Liberal Democrat Shadow Justice Secretary, Simon Hughes, in commenting on the Home Affairs Committee report acknowledged that there is an urgent need **“to stop institutionalised racism in the criminal justice system,”** and urged the government to **“change policy urgently if Black Britons are to know that in the future they are equal before the law.”**

Nacro, the crime reduction charity, whilst welcoming the report, condemned the government for its opposition to targets as a means of reducing discrimination in the criminal justice process. Its Chief Executive, Paul Cavadino said: **“The Committee is wrong to oppose setting targets to produce more equal outcomes for young black people in the criminal justice process. Discrimination in the criminal justice system remains the most important factor behind the prosecution and imprisonment of disproportionate numbers of young black people.”**

The Home Affairs report sings the familiar tune that seeks to attribute blame for black youth crime on 'dysfunctional' black families - which must be challenged. We are told that more black children grow up in lone parent families where there is usually an absent father. According to the National Family Planning and Parenting Institute, the father-child relationship is important for **“children’s greater self-confidence, mental health, positive behaviour and relationships, educational attainment and cognitive skills.”**

In other words, they are suggesting that black families produce criminals. However, hard evidence disproves this theory, as Dr Stanislas told Black Britain: **“Whilst there are some problems among black families - if we look at white families, they produce more criminals of every type, from extreme sexual offenders, paedophiles to mass murderers, than the black family.”**

Black Families should not be used as an excuse to explain away crime

Dr Stanislas warns that when examining crime and the black community it is essential to separate genuine issues of concern with what is in reality an ongoing criminalization of black people. Black families should not be used as an excuse for crime within black communities or placed under a microscope, especially when **“the white family produces more dysfunctional individuals,”** he said.

Patterns of offending in the USA and Britain point to crimes committed by black communities being linked to poverty, whilst crimes committed by whites have different motives as Dr Stanislas argued: **Sexual offences are predominantly committed by white men – so why are they not talking about the white families that create them?”**

That is a pertinent question. However, the rule of white supremacy dictates that white interests must be protected at all costs. Therefore questioning why “normal” white families commit such a wide range of crimes and commit more crimes than black people is not on the agenda. Dr Stanislas told Black Britain: **“Where I would accept the definition of white supremacy on this issue is in the need and requirement [of the state] to constantly denigrate and demonize black people and the constant creation and re-creation of narratives that do so.”**

The report makes several references to **“social exclusion”** as **“a key underlying cause of overrepresentation”** of young black people in the criminal justice system. But **“social exclusion”** and **“social disadvantage”** have become convenient buzzwords for avoiding any state responsibility in this over-representation.

Young black people are stopped and searched by **police officers**, and at every stage of the criminal justice system **decisions are made** that seal the fate of black youths in deciding whether to caution or arrest and on sentencing and detention. **There is a degree of intentionality in these processes** – so using abstract phrases like “**social exclusion**” and “**social disadvantage**” mask the underlying truths. Professor Ben Bowling, a specialist advisor to the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry, shared the view that the issue of responsibility in the report was far too abstract:

“One of the criticisms that I would make of the report as a whole is that the whole deliberation ends up being very amorphous. Where do you turn both in explaining how this horrendous situation has come about and in understanding where you go from here is rather diffused and rather abstract, because it’s the fault of so many processes. It’s the fault of so many people who are un-named that it becomes almost like nobody’s fault.”

Professor Bowling told Black Britain that he has three major criticisms of the Home Affairs Committee report, stating that in the first instance: **“I don’t think it’s anywhere near critical enough in identifying governments as responsible for the situation that we find ourselves in – particularly in relation to criminal justice.”**

Letting the police loose on black communities without proper control and accountability has allowed black youths to become easy targets for officers seeking to improve their arrest rates by doing stop and searches on groups of young men on the streets of London. Professor Bowling said: **“The report does not go far enough in saying that this is not something that has happened by chance or accident.”**

His second criticism of the report is its lack of historical perspective pertaining to the experience of black people in Britain. Witnesses mentioned slavery and therefore the Committee was obliged to report it: **“Some witnesses traced historic patterns of disadvantage back to slavery: ‘Slavery is a crime unprecedented in human history in terms of its large scale effects, and we are still living with the contemporary effects.’”**

However, Professor Bowling told Black Britain that the issue of slavery **“wasn’t taken forward anywhere near as far as I would have liked.”** His third major criticism was in his opinion the weakness of the recommendations. He told Black Britain that the recommendations in the report do not go far enough and that the first point of action should be to **“put the leash back on the police.”**

The issue of the chattel enslavement of African peoples is not irrelevant to the issue of young black people and crime in Britain. In his joint submission to the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry, Professor Bowling and co-advisor Coretta Phillips point out that even before black people arrived in Britain en masse in the 1950s, surveys on public attitudes among white Britons revealed that there were **“widespread perceptions of black people as inherently inferior to Europeans and inclined towards crime and deviance.”**

Given that in the preceding 200 years, Christianity, scientific racism, literature and popular culture have all served to justify slavery and denigrate people of African descent it is hardly surprising that the ordinary British public would hold these views, nor that these prejudices would be held by members of the police and criminal justice system and influence their actions. Professor Bowling told Black Britain: **“In the 1980s the police imagined a black criminal underclass and now sadly, that is what we are approaching.”**

The criminal justice system is part of the problem, not the solution

In 1985 there were 4000 black people in British prisons. Today there are 12000, making the black prison population five times greater than numbers in the general population. The reality is that 1.5 per cent of the UK black population is in custody – and this did not happen by accident or solely

through **“social exclusion.”**

Professor Bowling uses the term **prisonisation** to describe the impact of the continued criminalization of the black community which ends employment and makes an individual virtually unemployable, hinders skills development and drains financial and cultural resources: **“Rather than making it generally less likely that an individual will re-offend, it makes it more likely... but also as a consequence of the prisonisation, which entrenches criminal identity.”**

Over the last thirty years, research has shown that the more criminalised black communities become, the more likely it is that serious crimes will be committed by individuals from the black community. As punitive measures have increased, so has the incidence of violent crime. According to Professor Bowling, the criminal justice system is part of the problem of crime within the black community, not the solution.

He told Black Britain: **“I think that even though the stated intention of the criminal justice system is to reduce crime and do justice, unfortunately it does injustice and causes crime, rather than the other way around.”**

According to Professor Bowling it will take both **“creativity”** and **“imagination”** for young black people to break out of the cycle of crime as there is a real problem of people who have experienced youth custody and the resultant problem of broken families. The level of disproportionality of black imprisonment is now larger in the UK than it is in the USA.

He told Black Britain: **“That is quite shocking for a country that prides itself on so-called Britishness and fair play. We have been going down the wrong street and it’s time to change course.”**

Dr Stanislas believes that black people face **“systemic”** and **“institutionalized”** problems in Britain that transform into social disadvantage: **“The inability of some black families to provide support for their children as mentioned in the report is a reflection in part of systemic and institutional issues. The majority of black people in this country who are not poor, are not far from it.”**

One of Professor Bowling’s recommendations for alternative approaches to reduce the numbers of black people getting caught up in the system is in early prevention. A 40-year follow up of one such project found that every dollar invested in pre-school education yields a \$13 reduction in crime. Children who participate in sport, theatre, drama, music education and training are less likely to offend than those who do not.

Yet as Dr Stanislas told Black Britain, black people live in the most socially deprived areas in terms of resources, leisure facilities and opportunities. This does not remove individual responsibility and choice, but **“the evidence is clear that the systems, institutions and policies of the state are more significant in creating or constraining people’s opportunities than any action by the individuals themselves.”**

He commended the work of organisations that deal with young people already caught up in the system and suggested that much more government money should be made available for independent programmes run by members of the black community. The irony of the situation is that the government is pouring money into arresting, detaining, trying and imprisoning young black people when funding alternative approaches could reap greater long term benefits in terms of crime prevention.

Professor Bowling told Black Britain that a week at a court trial costs the taxpayer £100,000 and the cost to detain a child in a secure unit for one year is £175,000: **“What about taking just a bit of**

that quarter of a million pounds and investing it in the future of our young people? It doesn't take a genius to work out the cost benefit."

Whether one uses the term white supremacy or not, the reality is the same; that black people have historically been denigrated, demonized, routinely targeted by the police and have encountered discrimination within the criminal justice system that has led to the present situation of a minority of black youth being involved in criminal activity, but accounting for a disproportionate rate of crime among the 10-17 age group.

As experts have argued, the criminalization of the black community breeds crime; it does not solve it, but has a destabilizing effect on families and individuals. "Prisonisation," as Professor Bowling states, entrenches a criminal identity in an individual making it more likely that they will commit crime than not. At the same time, whilst black families are demonized by the state and mainstream media and blamed for crime within the black community, the reality is that white families, as Dr Stanislas argues produce more criminals but are not subject to the same levels of scrutiny and judgement as black families.

Professor Bowling has pointed the way forward – to restrict the actions of the police and invest in community-based approaches to crime, which I would have to support and endorse wholeheartedly. As he states, such initiatives are **“not only a road to humanity and social justice,”** but also a means of achieving **“a safer society.”**

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