

Criminal Justice System Race Unit and Victims and Confidence Unit Findings

The Experiences of Young Black Men as Victims of Crime

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Background

The Office for Criminal Justice Reform carried out research into the experiences of young Black men who had been victims of crime. The research is a contribution to ensuring that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people receive equal treatment from the Criminal Justice System (CJS). It will also inform initiatives to improve services to victims. Both strands of work are key to raising levels of confidence, in particular that of BME people, in the CJS. Young Black men have particularly poor confidence that the CJS treats them fairly.¹ The objective of the research was to identify how services could better meet the needs of young Black men and to explore factors associated with their confidence in the CJS. Twenty-five in-depth qualitative interviews and two focus groups were held with Black Caribbean and Black African men aged from 16 to 24 in Birmingham and London in March 2004.² A total of 41 people, who had been victims of crime in the previous 18 months, took part. The research aimed to explore views and attitudes in depth, rather than to generate statistical findings.

Key Points

- The young men infrequently had any contact with formal agencies that could help victims of crime. None received help from Victim Support and awareness of Victim Support was very low. There was considerable potential demand for using Victim Support or other support services.
- Support from friends and family was very important and highly valued by the young men.
- The young men generally lacked confidence in the police's ability to deal effectively with crime. The views of some reflected a belief in police racism. Lack of confidence in the police and CJS was an important reason for not reporting crime to the police. A response of some of the young men was to seek to retaliate directly against the perpetrators.
- While the young men who reported the crime held fairly positive views on the initial response of the police, there was much more dissatisfaction with the follow-up.
- The report highlights the need to make services to victims more accessible for young Black men and to improve the service provided by the police. It makes recommendations to local CJS agencies and others as to how to achieve this.

Experiences of crime and the young men's response

The young men had been victims of crimes such as robberies of mobile phones, thefts from vehicles, assaults and burglaries. They generally lacked confidence in the police's ability to deal effectively with crime, sometimes linked to a belief that the police did not take crime against Black people seriously.

"They [the police] are very sluggish when going to Black people."

Family and friends were an extremely important and valued source of support with emotional and practical needs. About two-thirds of the young men lived with their families.

"My family dealt with it in the perfect way. They just offered me their support, they tried to persuade me to go to the police, but when they kind of clearly realised that I didn't want to do that, they were just behind me and they were just there for me."

Some victims acted to protect themselves or to feel less vulnerable, eg by installing security equipment or avoiding going out alone. A few acquired knives. One response was to try to retaliate against the perpetrators. There was some support for the view it was legitimate to retaliate, due to perceived police failings.

Reporting to the police

Reasons for not reporting the crime to the police reflect those of victims in general. For example, a belief of that it would not achieve anything or that the crime was not sufficiently serious were reasons not to report.³ The views of some victims in this study, however, were linked to perceptions of police racism. Some concern was voiced about inadequate protection from intimidation if the crime was reported. Some victims who did not report the crime would do so if it were more serious. A key factor in encouraging reporting was confidence that the police would take effective action. A section of the young men, however, felt strongly that they would not turn to the police, or only in the most extreme circumstances.

Some who did report the crime expected it to be actively investigated, and at least hoped for justice to be done. Others were more pessimistic or reported for insurance purposes. Most who reported the crime were, overall, dissatisfied with the service. There were fairly positive views on the initial response. Most thought the police were polite, though somewhat impersonal and mechanistic. There was widespread dissatisfaction, however, with the follow-up. Victims got little information about what happened next. This was interpreted as evidence that the police had done little or nothing.

"Basically, they [the police] made false promises. They said that they was going to go and investigate the situation. But in my eyes, they didn't do nothing."

Treatment by the police and keeping victims informed are critical to victim satisfaction in general. In the case of these victims, poor service may even be interpreted as inferior treatment due to discrimination. There was, however, relatively little evidence of the police stereotyping the young men by treating them as suspects rather than victims.

Support services

None of the victims sought or received any help from Victim Support. Contact with formal services (apart from the police) in connection with the incident was infrequent. Awareness of Victim Support was poor. Those who were aware of it associated it with emotional support or counselling (although Victim Support does not describe what it offers as counselling). There was little awareness of other

forms of assistance it offers. There was a fairly widespread interest in using Victim Support or other support services available to victims, once they were explained.

“Now I know that there are people out there for me who will help me.”

Amongst those potentially interested, there was a strong demand for practical or financial help, but some were interested in emotional support. A minority view, however, was that Victim Support was for older, more privileged and less street-wise people. How the young men would be treated personally was crucial to encouraging their use of support services. Those providing services needed an ability to connect with the young men, and a knowledge and understanding of their situation and viewpoint. The ethnicity, age or gender of the person was important for some victims but not others.

Recommendations

The main recommendations include:

- As the views and attitudes of young Black men varied widely, different types of support will be suitable for different people. Services should be sensitive to the needs of individuals.
- As word of mouth is a powerful influence on beliefs about the police, improving the experience of young Black male victims who report crimes is essential. The Office for Criminal Justice Reform has asked Local Criminal Justice Boards and CJS agencies to focus on the quality of service from police and other CJS staff and improving information to victims as key priorities.
- Information about Victim Support and other support services should be communicated more effectively to young Black men, including general raising of awareness and informing victims after a crime. Methods of communication must be relevant, appropriate, timely and accessible.
- In view of their key role, publicity should also be aimed at parents and other relatives of young victims of crime.
- A perceived association with the police may discourage some young Black men from using Victim Support. Alternative means of access to services, such as self-referral through the Victim Supportline, should be further promoted. Publicity should emphasize that services are free and confidential and that the crime need not be reported to the police.
- Peer education should be explored as a way of communicating information.
- Schools, colleges or universities should be engaged in seeking to support young victims and to educate them about support services. Local authorities, the NHS and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships should also be engaged in this process.
- Initiatives run by CJS agencies and Local Criminal Justice Boards to improve young Black men's engagement with the CJS should be used to inform them about support services for victims. Effective consultation with young Black men is also needed to develop appropriate and accessible services. The Office for Criminal Justice Reform is about to run pilot projects to demonstrate how community engagement can benefit the delivery of services to victims and others.
- The capacity of BME voluntary and community organisations needs to be further built up to allow young people access to a range of services.

- Local Criminal Justice Boards have a crucial role in improving services at a local level. Such improvements will help them to meet their targets for increasing BME confidence that the CJS treats them equally and increasing the satisfaction of victims and witnesses. Local Criminal Justice Boards should consider how to facilitate implementing these recommendations, with other partners.

Further information

The full report *The Experiences of Young Black Men as Victims of Crime* is available on www.cjsonline.gov.uk
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- 1 Attwood C, Singh G, Prime D, Creasey and others, *2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey: people, families and communities* (2003), Home Office Research Study 270.
- 2 The fieldwork was carried out by NOP.
- 3 Dodd T, Nicholas S, Povey D and Walker A, *Crime in England and Wales 2003/4* (2004), Home Office Statistical Bulletin 10/04.