

## Challenging and changing racist attitudes and behaviour in young people

Challenging and changing racist attitudes and behaviour in young people has long been a concern in education and youth and community work. More recently, with the introduction of racially aggravated crimes, similar concerns have been addressed by criminal justice agencies. This research looks at five projects, all with varying approaches, and examines the views of the young people, between the ages of 11 and 21 and from a range of ethnic groups, who participated. Conducted by Lemos&Crane, the study explores attitudes towards racial and ethnic groups and what young people said influenced their attitudes and behaviour.

- Whilst most of the young people involved in school-based case studies reported no negative feelings towards different communities, a significant minority *did* express dislike of other groups. Boys were more likely to do so than girls. Young people participating in the projects in multi-cultural areas and schools were also more likely to express such views.
- Refugees and asylum-seekers were prominent amongst groups identified as being 'disliked'. They were perceived as receiving preferential treatment and were sometimes connected to perceived security threats. Other groups identified were other newly arrived communities, for example 'Portuguese', 'Asians', 'Muslims', 'black people', 'Afghanistanis', 'Iraqis' and 'white English'/'white British' were also specifically mentioned.
- The influences on these ideas appeared to be friends and family, local events and circumstances, personal experiences and media reporting of local, national and international matters. Resulting perceptions, coming from an intermingling of these sources, were often confused.
- In general, the projects studied appeared to be successful at conveying the message that racism was wrong, and in influencing behaviour and attitudes positively. More generalised programmes seemed to be less effective at shifting entrenched prejudiced attitudes where these were evident, although the one highly intensive and targeted initiative studied appeared to have some success.
- Projects benefited from well-defined objectives, a clear structure, a range of inputs, sustained activities over a period of time, and a focus on encouraging reflection on personal attitudes and experiences.
- The researchers conclude that if current policy aspirations to combat racial and religious prejudice and to build social capital between communities are to be met, a sustained educational initiative is required.



## Background

Schools and education policy-makers have been seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of young people on race and racism since the 1970s. Social landlords and criminal justice agencies have more recently become involved in these activities, and 'community cohesion' has emerged as a strand of policy and practice promoted by the Home Office and other Government departments.

Against this backdrop a number of projects have been developed by education, criminal justice, housing, youth work and voluntary agencies with a view to challenging and changing racist attitudes in young people. The effectiveness of these projects has rarely been assessed, least of all from the perspective of the young people themselves. This research set out to do this by looking at the work of five different projects (see Box 1).

## Young people's attitudes

In two of the case study projects (Show Racism the Red Card, Stafford, and You, Me and Us, Peterborough), substantial numbers of young people were involved – over 550 11- and 12-year-olds in total. In these areas, young people were invited to share their understanding of racism and their perceptions of how others and they themselves viewed different groups of people.

In both locations, nearly all young people understood that being nasty to someone because they were different was wrong, yet most thought some groups of people were disliked because of their race/ethnicity. A sizeable minority in each acknowledged that they disliked particular communities themselves, and around a quarter thought there were too many people from different communities living in England.

Dislike of people from different groups was more marked in the locality with a more multi-ethnic population; within that locality, it was more marked in the case study schools with more multi-ethnic local catchments.

## Box 1: The projects

Five projects were encompassed in the study. Their widely varying nature meant that different research techniques were used in the different settings:

### Show Racism the Red Card, Stafford

*Centred on using professional footballers as anti-racist role models, the project is accompanied by educational resources and complements the PSHE/Citizenship curriculum. In Stafford it is delivered into schools on a 'negotiated access' basis. The research activity was focused in one school, using 'assisted surveys'.*

### You, Me and Us, Peterborough

*A programme of activities and workshops, again designed to complement the PHSE/Citizenship curriculum. The initiative has comprehensive coverage in Peterborough's schools and seeks to raise awareness, reduce racism and challenge intolerance. Three schools were encompassed in the case study, again using an 'assisted survey' technique.*

### Diversity Awareness Programme, London Probation Service

*This is an intensive and sustained modular programme working on a one-to-one basis with white offenders who have either committed a racially motivated offence or whose behaviour indicates entrenched racist attitudes. This case study comprised in-depth interviews with two young offenders who had taken part.*

### Street Life, Tower Hamlets

*This project was a workshop exploring race and racism that formed part of Tower Hamlets' 'Summer University', a voluntary and informal education service offering free learning activities in the long school break. A participatory approach was developed for the research, involving 10 young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and structured interview techniques.*

### Jubilee Football Tournament, Rochdale

*This was a social housing sector initiative intended to build and strengthen relationships between white and Asian young people living in close proximity to each other but in a context where tensions were more evident than familiarity or friendship. The research comprised facilitated group discussions with young people from the respective communities. About 70 young people were involved.*

## Who was disliked and why?

Feelings of dislike applied to – and were held by – the range of different groups represented across Britain and in the relevant locality. In both localities Asian groups were commonly cited as the targets of dislike, as were refugees and asylum seekers. In Peterborough, the newly arrived Portuguese community was also frequently mentioned by those expressing dislike.

Analysis of the reasons for ‘dislike’ revealed the following themes:

### ■ Security fears/terrorism:

“Afghans – Because they hijack planes and kill people.”

“People in Iraq ... did horrible non-forgiveable actions!”

### ■ Dislike of difference

“Coloured people ... are different from us.”

“ASIANS... are different.”

### ■ ‘Too many incomers’

“Pakistan ... are invading our country.”

“Asylum seekers – there’s too many of them.”

### ■ Preferential treatment

“Pakistanis, Muslims, Indians, Iraqis – because they do nothing at all for our country and get free housing, food and they have their own country.”

“Refugees ... they get more than us.”

### ■ Perceived hostility

“England – because they swear at you.”

“Portuguese – because [of] their bad behaviour [and] looking starily.”

These ideas had been influenced by various intermingling factors, and often revealed misunderstanding and confusion. Some young people made little distinction between Pakistani people in their own community and Muslim terrorists reportedly from Afghanistan or elsewhere. The events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had undoubtedly played a part; young people’s attitudes had been influenced not just by events themselves but also by the surrounding media coverage and discourse. Well-publicised local circumstances and events also played their part, as did the views of family and friends, and direct personal experience.

Young people generally understood racism as consisting of ‘bad thoughts and worse behaviour’. Whilst a sizeable proportion of those surveyed held negative attitudes about some people from different ethnic groups, the vast majority of young people indicated that they felt that unequal or unfair treatment was wrong, suggesting an element of paradox or denial.

## The projects’ effectiveness

The projects investigated had a variety of specific objectives and were based in different settings with a range of target audiences (see Box 1). Two were general and school-based, one was a part of a voluntary and informal learning initiative, one was a neighbourhood-based football project, and one an intensive one-to-one intervention with young offenders.

The more generalised school-based projects were assessed positively by the young people and appeared to have been successful in reinforcing the belief that racist bullying and name-calling was wrong. Over 60 per cent of young people in one locality and over 40 per cent in the second reported that the project had made them think or feel differently. Most of the remainder reported no change because they were already aware of, and opposed to, racism. However, a small proportion in each area reported a persistence of their previous negative attitudes:

“I still felt the same because I don’t think it’s right to blow up the World Trade Center and have chemical weapons.”

“[My behaviour has not changed] because I don’t care.”

In contrast, the project working intensively with racially motivated offenders did appear to have some success in achieving a positive influence on deeply entrenched negative attitudes and behaviour.

### What helped projects succeed?

The evidence of the case studies suggests that important factors in successful interventions designed to change racist attitudes and behaviour in young people are:

- well-defined objectives (which may extend beyond challenging racist attitudes and behaviour);
- a clear structure;
- a range of activities, presenters and facilitators;
- sustained activities over a period of time: one-off activities make much less impact;
- encouraging reflection on personal attitudes and experiences, and inquiry into local events and circumstances;
- learning through doing and experiencing, not just listening and talking;
- seeking to change attitudes and behaviour for the future.

### Where next? Objectives of a new approach

The research uncovered some worrying indicators about the relationship between proximity and tolerance. Although not set up to investigate this set of questions, it was notable that the attitudes of young people attending schools in multi-cultural areas revealed less not more tolerance. Similarly, one of the projects investigated was specifically concerned with brokering tensions between the young people in neighbouring

communities who attended the same schools. This poses some uncomfortable questions – not least to school communities – and certainly indicates that proximity in itself can not be assumed to contribute to current policy goals.

Drawing on the views expressed by young people, the researchers conclude that a successful programme to challenge racism and promote community cohesion requires a sustained educational initiative to:

- strengthen everyone's sense of identity;
- identify, challenge and uproot prejudiced attitudes and behaviour;
- give insight and empathy into the identity and experiences of others;
- create an understanding of difference;
- establish common ground and shared values and interests;
- encourage and build friendships across divisions which would create long-term mutual obligations.

### About the project

The research was undertaken by social researchers Lemos&Crane. For details of the projects examined, see Box 1. The projects were visited between February and December 2003.

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### For further information

The full report, **The search for tolerance: Challenging and changing racist attitudes and behaviour in young people** by Gerard Lemos, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 284 7, price £14.95).

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