

# Home Office research shows crack 'on every street corner' in Home Secretary's constituency

The spectre of a violent crack market undermining Britain's black communities has been revived by research in Nottingham which reported that the "highly visible crack street dealing scene ... was dominated by Afro-Caribbeans"<sup>1</sup> and by news that two of London's police crack operations are to be closed down.

The research was particularly sensitive as it was funded by the Home Office and concerned part of the Home Secretary's Nottingham constituency. Though not geared to establishing prevalence estimates, Dr Philip Bean and his co-researchers were in no doubt that by 1991/92 "crack was so readily available in the area ... we worked in that it was difficult to doubt that there was a considerable market for it". One respondent said that while in 1987 crack was hard to find, now it was "on every street corner".

With the growth in crack dealing within the black community came guns and violence, the researchers report. A black crack user said "it's messing up the black community, they're shooting each other ... stealing from each other".

In London's East End, the Newham Drugs Advice Project has made special efforts to reach local black drug users and crack users. Its coordinator, Viv Reid, himself black, describes the ostentatious consumption and public violence of local black crack dealers. "[They] attract police attention by their use

of Mafia-style shootouts." The area's white criminal families are also profiting from the lucrative crack market, but dispose of their wealth and their enemies in a less public fashion, says Reid.<sup>2</sup>

His words appear to have been spectacularly and tragically illustrated by the recent petrol-bombing of a house in the East End which left two men dead. Police allege the attack was "drug-related" and are looking for a group of five to seven Afro-Caribbean men thought to have been responsible.<sup>3</sup>

From within the drugs field, much criticism has been levelled at the media for portraying crack use and dealing as exclusively a 'black problem'. Even black workers and distinguished researchers are not immune from the accusation that in targeting crack use in areas of a high black population, inevitably they find what they are looking for, focusing the spotlight on just one part of the race-drugs dimension.

## Most crack users white

The Nottingham researchers admit their chosen area was one which has "a large Afro-Caribbean population" but still found that less than half the crack users were black.

In the same Home Office publication, broader research from the Centre for Research on Drugs and Health Behaviour found that just 11 per cent of a sample of cocaine/crack users not in touch with services and drawn from across England and Wales were "black British", while over two-thirds were white British.<sup>4</sup> There is the intriguing but so far unexplored possibility that research such as that in Nottingham, but done in predominantly white populated areas, might have turned up a very different racial picture of crack use and dealing.

*Druglink* spoke to a number of workers across the country in London, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. Nobody denied that Afro-Caribbean communities across the UK are experiencing difficulties with both crack use and dealing. Interviewed by *Panorama* recently, a Notting Hill community leader used the word "epidemic".<sup>5</sup> Although the data analysis has yet to be done, the collection process of Hilary Klee's research on Afro-Caribbean drug use in central Manchester indicates high levels of crack use among the target group.

But any attempt to pin crack down as largely a 'black problem' will currently founder on the rock of circumstantial evidence. Nobody knows how many white crack users there are and crack bought in black areas is not necessarily consumed there. Conrad Spencer of Birmingham's Community Drug Team tells of clients who "look the part" being kerb-crawled by white men in prestigious cars looking to buy. Are they buying for themselves or for resale in white areas?

In Glasgow research has shown that young drug users tend to travel to more deprived areas to buy drugs, and travelled further the more expensive the drug. The researchers say this could give a false impression of the extent of drug use in deprived areas as well as concentrating drug-related crime and nuisance in the most vulnerable communities. It was even the case that initially many drug users gave false addresses, invariably in "what they regarded as their local toughest, roughest street", potentially further distorting the picture of drug use in deprived areas.<sup>6</sup>

In cities where the most deprived areas also have the highest black populations, the effect could be to

give a false impression of the extent of black drug use.

The concentration on crack undoubtedly distorts the picture of black drug use in Britain and of the needs of black drug users. Fading into the background for lack of attention may be the reality of a racially mixed polydrug using population.

Drug use patterns found among the white population are by and large replicated among non-white groups. Our straw poll quickly revealed that there are female Asian glue sniffers and that young people of all races fully participate in the dance scene, taking the drugs found there. There are Asian and Afro-Caribbean injectors, young Asian crack dealers and users, and so on.

Results from the North West Thames and South East Thames drug misuse databases show that half or more of the black clients seen in 1991/2 were using opiates as their main drug. Though cocaine was the main drug more often among black clients than white, in both groups it accounted for far fewer clients than opiates. Among blacks as among whites, the likelihood is that in Britain heroin remains the main problem drug.

## 'Stutman was right' offensive

The Nottingham research will add fuel to the 'Stutman was right' lobby. It was April 1989 when US special agent Robert Stutman gave Britain his personal guarantee that "two years from now you will have a serious crack problem".<sup>7</sup>

Metropolitan police officers facing the disbanding of their specialist crack squads have gone on the offensive, providing the ammunition for a mini-surge of media interest by pointing to evidence that Stutman's startling predictions have either come to pass, or can only be held at bay by continued vigilance.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

The Crack Intelligence Coordinating Unit and Operation Dalehouse (which targeted crack-related violence in London) should both have closed by the end of 1992, but the seizure statistics they helped leave behind will keep crack interest alive through 1993.

The issue of crack use is itself high profile, and particularly so when mixed with race and

violence. Careers can be made from media-friendly pronouncements and from claiming expertise in this area that are simply not to be had from more mundane day to day drugs work. Crack supplies the 'fast track' to publicity that solvents and heroin fail to provide.

Resources too are on the line and funders faced with the threat of streets ricocheting with the bullets of well-heeled black crack dealers may be more prepared to prioritise services that promise to respond to this threat.

But there is an alternative perspective which sees black crack use as being given too little, not too much, attention.

Some of the black crack users interviewed in the Nottingham study interpreted the relative lack of attention to crack as racial prejudice. "At the moment it's concentrated in the ghettos, in poor areas, in black areas. They ain't bothered; when the white kids become more affected, they will be."

1. Bean P. and Pearson Y. "Cocaine and crack in Nottingham 1989/90 and 1991/92". In: Mott J. ed. *Crack and cocaine use in England and Wales*. Home Office, 1992.

2. Hargreaves C. *Snow fields*. Holmes and Meier/Zed Books, 1992.

3. Beaumont P. "Petrol bombing kills two as drug war flares up." *Observer*, 6 December 1992.

4. Dean A. et al. "Crack and cocaine use in Britain in 1990: first report of a national study." In: Mott J. ed. *Crack and cocaine use in England and Wales*. Home Office, 1992.

5. *Panorama*. BBC TV, 16 November 1992.

6. Forsyth A.J.M. et al. "Geographical aspects of scoring illegal drugs." *British Journal of Criminology*: 1992, 32(3), p.292-309.

7. "Crack stories from the States." *Druglink*, September/October 1989, p.6-7.

8. Rose D. and Hugill B. "Crack spawns crime epidemic." *Observer*, 14 November 1992.

9. Hyder K. "Police drug units to close." *Time Out*, 18 November 1992.

10. *Panorama*, op cit.

11. Bell S. "Highway to a burn-out." *Sunday Times*, 5 July 1992.