

The 1981 Brixton riots were fuelled by relentless stop and searches on black people by police looking for cannabis. Now, 25 years later, are officers still unfairly targeting ethnic minorities on the streets? **Diane Taylor** investigates.

Frontline tactics

In the days leading up to the 1981 Brixton riots the rising tension in the area known as The Frontline was palpable, according to an eye witness who lived there. The stopping and searching of 1,000 people in under a week intensified resentments, particularly amongst young, black men and by Saturday April 11 The Frontline was under occupation by police. Out of nowhere a brick aimed at a police officer flew through the air. Suddenly bricks started to fly in greater numbers. The riots had begun.

During three days in April 1981 the lively, bustling streets of Brixton were transformed into a war zone. Cars and buildings were set alight, pubs were firebombed and homes were looted. Woolworths and other shops were smashed up and looted. The area around The Frontline was reduced to piles of rubble and glass.

SWAMP

The spark which triggered off the riots was a rumour that police had prevented a young black man from receiving hospital treatment after he had been stabbed. But relations between police and the black community were already poor and stops and searches for suspected possession of cannabis were common. Many young black men believed these searches amounted to discrimination against them. Under the notorious 'Sus' law under which anybody could be stopped and searched if officers merely suspected they might be planning to carry out a crime, harassment was frequent. In early April, Operation Swamp - an attempt to cut street crime in Brixton which used the Sus law to stop more than 1,000 people in six days - heightened tensions.

Following the riots there was a report from Lord Scarman which heavily criticised the police and the way they treated black Londoners. The report blamed serious social and economic problems affecting Britain's inner cities for the riots along with the "racial disadvantage that is a fact of British life".

The investigation found the rioting was caused by a spontaneous crowd reaction to police action and had not been planned. Over 300 people were injured, 83 premises and 23 vehicles were damaged during the disturbances, at an estimated cost of £7.5 million. Lord Scarman called for a new emphasis on community policing and said more people from ethnic minorities should be recruited to the force. The mixture of high unemployment, deprivation, racial tensions and poor relations with police were

not unique to Brixton. By the time Lord Scarman's report on the events in Brixton was published in November 1981, similar disturbances had taken place in other English cities, including Liverpool and Manchester.

The report led to an end to the Sus law, the creation of the Police Complaints Authority and police/community consultative groups as well as new approaches to police recruitment and training.

So have Lord Scarman's recommendations led to real changes on the ground? Can innocent young black men now walk the streets without fear of being wrongly accused of possessing drugs or other crimes? The answer would appear to be no. Sir William Macpherson's inquiry into the handling of the Stephen Lawrence murder, published in 2000, said the Metropolitan Police still suffered from "institutional racism".

The fact that the police now have to abide by race equality laws which they were exempt from at the time of the Brixton riots, has made a significant difference to policing. But according to Home Office studies black, Asian and people from other minority ethnic groups are still far more likely than white people to be stopped and searched by police officers. During 2004/5 black people were more than six times more likely than whites to be stopped while Asians were almost twice as likely to be stopped as whites.

STRIP SEARCH

Seventeen-year-old Darren, a black teenager from London believes that little has changed in terms of police attitudes towards young black men. He says that police either assume young black men are carrying copious amounts of drugs in their pockets or just search for drugs as an excuse to harass members of the black community.

"I've been stopped and searched at least 20 times," says Darren. "They always say they're looking for drugs and guns but they've never found anything on me and they always let me go in the end. One time they did a kind of strip search on me in the middle of the street looking for drugs. One of them put his hand down the back of my trousers and felt around my bum in case I was hiding drugs in there. Having something like that happen to you in the middle of a busy street where everyone can see you is really humiliating. It makes me very angry."

He added that he also experienced harassment when he was driving his car and that police would



sometimes stop him and search his car for drugs. "Why do they still target young black men? They continue to stereotype us and assume that if a young, black guy has a car he has either stolen it or raised the money for it by selling drugs."

Rahim, 21, has also experienced police harassment. "I was coming out of my house minding my own business when they stopped me and said they had to search me for drugs. I co-operated with them, I had nothing to hide and I hadn't done anything wrong. Police are supposed to be people you can rely on but apart from a minority who do do their jobs properly we hate them. They use searching us for drugs and guns as an excuse to harass us."

Paul Andell, chair of Lambeth's stop and search monitoring group says that post-Scarman there have been big changes in policing black communities.

"There is a lot more consultation with the community. The police message that they're more concerned about possession of class A drugs than cannabis is welcome. The police do have a better sense of not targeting a specific group because of their ethnic appearance but there are still issues of concern particularly around substance misuse and how that's addressed. There is a need for more partnership work around drugs. Police need to work more closely with licensing authorities, DAATs and local authorities. There is a gap between the police strategic approach to stop and search and its actual practice on the streets."

In 2001, as borough commander of Lambeth, Brian Paddick - a young police sergeant on the frontline during the 1981 riots - set up a bold and controversial pilot scheme in Brixton in under which anyone who was caught with a small amount of cannabis was released without charge and their drugs were confiscated. The aim of the scheme was to allow police officers to devote more time to target heroin and crack users and dealers. David Blunkett, while Home Secretary, credited Paddick's liberal policing methods as the inspiration for downgrading cannabis from a class B to class C drug.

WEAPONS

Stafford Scott, a black community activist who witnessed the Broadwater Farm riots, says that people have complained about an increase in stop and search since 7/7.

"Stop and search for cannabis possession does seem to have reduced but now police stop young men and say they're looking for knives," says Scott.

'Stop and search for cannabis possession does seem to have reduced but now police stop young men and say they're looking for knives'

"I can walk around smoking a roll up now which is something I couldn't have got away with 25 years ago. But what the police aren't doing around stop and search, which is something we were calling for in the 80s, is intelligence-led policing."

The Home Office 'Stop and Search - Know Your Rights Pass It On' campaign was launched in May. It aims to inform young people in black and ethnic minority communities about stop and search as a police tactic, what their rights are when they are stopped and how they can complain if they feel they have been mistreated.

But John Roberts, the Metropolitan Police Authority's lead member on stop and search, expressed concern that the Home Office had scaled down its initial plans for a high profile launch targeted at all urban youth and instead ultimately adopted a low key approach focusing on black and ethnic minority communities.

He said: "It is in everyone's interests, police and public alike, to be clear about what happens when a police officer stops a person in the street. Stop and search can be a very valuable police tool to help detect and prevent crime and to keep everybody safe. But it is important to ensure that it is carried out in a professional and respectful manner, in order for it to have positive impact on all our communities."

He added that what mattered was that stop and searches were intelligence-led rather than conducted randomly on the basis of ethnicity. He said that police officers were being trained to get 'key encounters' with people they stopped and searched right so that those approached by police officers didn't end up feeling enraged with the entire police force.

"If we get the key encounters right and searches are intelligence-led and carried out respectfully people are less likely to be pissed off with the police," he said.

While the focus of police drug searches on young black men may have shifted from cannabis to heroin and crack, similar examples of harassment to those pre-dating the Brixton riots remain. So could dissatisfaction manifest itself in new riots? Darren shakes his head. "We weren't even born when the riots happened. We're not part of all that and we want to move on. All we're trying to do is get on with our lives. There should be equal opportunities for everyone to do that. As for the way the police treat us we just have to live with it." •

Diane Taylor is a freelance journalist