

Race and drug policing in London

*Is London's drug policing racist?
What evidence there is argues to the contrary*

INTEGRAL TO THE debate on the effectiveness of Britain's drug laws and enforcement policies are concerns (some justifiable) about the policing of ethnic minorities, recently focused on cannabis and cocaine misuse by black British Afro-Caribbean people.

Although widespread and often contentious, discussion of this issue has left fundamental questions unanswered. Little is known, for example, about the operation and effects of search and arrest practices in relation to the detection of cannabis offences, or about the numbers from different ethnic groups arrested, charged or cautioned for drug offences.

Figure 1. Metropolitan police cannabis arrests

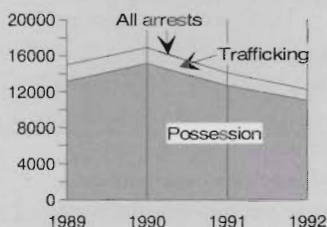
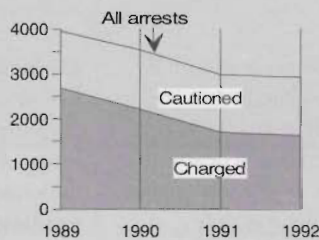


Figure 2. Metropolitan police cannabis arrests, black British Afro-Caribbeans only



Despite this lack of evidence, it is often suggested that drug enforcement strategies are influenced by systematic and widespread racial bias. For Lorraine Hewitt the position was unequivocal: "The need ... to enforce drug laws provides a justification for discriminatory policing aimed at particular ... ethnic groups ... police use the cannabis prohibition as a tool to exert control over the local black population."¹

Similarly there has been considerable concern over the last five years about crack cocaine and the black community. Some commentators assume that crack use is "overwhelmingly a black problem".² It's widely believed that this assumption arose from Stutman's address to the Association of Chief Police Officers' (ACPO) drugs conference in April 1989.³ In fact, the association between crack and black people had already been made by a Dutch police officer at the 1983 ACPO drugs conference.⁴

Given this assumption, other researchers have leapt to the conclusion that the Metropolitan Police's Crack Intelligence

Coordinating Unit was set up to "target Jamaican people".⁵ They know better. Dr Dorn and his colleagues at ISDD were given a copy of the unit's objectives and terms of reference in October 1989. It makes no mention of targeting Jamaicans or any other ethnic group.

Whichever standpoint one takes on British drug enforcement strategies, such statements based on ill-informed beliefs (or even sloppy editing) are a matter of no small concern.

The evidence

If Britain's drug laws are enforced by racially motivated police officers, we should find the evidence in the relevant statistics. The Metropolitan Police's arrest statistics for cannabis are a useful starting point.

Figure 1 presents cannabis arrests from 1989 to 1992, the latest full year for which figures are available.⁶ Is there evidence of increasing use of the cannabis laws to harass people? To the contrary: in 1992 4693 fewer people were arrested than in 1990, a 28 per cent decrease. Arrests for cannabis possession have also fallen: in 1992, 4121 fewer people were arrested than in 1989, a 27 per cent decrease.

In figure 2 we home in on arrests of 'black' people, defined as black British Afro-Caribbeans, one of the categories used in Metropolitan Police records (Identity Code 3). Method of case disposal, ie, caution or charge, is also shown.

A notable feature is the 31 per cent drop in the number of black people arrested for cannabis offences in 1989-1992. Of those arrested, the proportion charged has also dropped from 68 per cent to 44 per cent. This is matched by a 24 per cent increase in the proportion cautioned.

Research in the London Borough of Southwark in 1991 provides further evidence against the notion that drug enforcement strategies are racially biased: "There is no evidence ... that the police process a disproportionate number of black people for cannabis offences ... the proportions of black people processed for cannabis offences almost mirror the ethnic make up of the borough." (Emphasis added)

This research also noted a "particularly striking" increase in the use of cautioning in cases involving black people between 1989-1990, when their presence in all drug arrests in Southwark declined by some 12 per cent.⁷

Such evidence does not support the notion of systematic and widespread racial discrimination in drug policing in London. This conclusion, however, must be considered tentative. There remains substantial room for improvement in terms of data, research methods and statistical interpretation. ○

31% fewer black people were arrested

from
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The author is a Metropolitan Police Detective Sergeant with a specialist interest in drug misuse.

1. Quote is from: Release. *A Release White Paper on Reform of the Drugs Laws: Release*, 1992, p.11, endorsed by Ms Hewitt at 1994 SCODA AGM.
2. Quoted in: Pearson G. *et al. Drugs, people and services in Lewisham*. Drug Information Project, 1991.
3. Stutman R. "Crack stories from the States." *Druglink*: 1989, p.6-7.
4. Koningh B. Th. de. "The heroin scene; the Amsterdam connection." In: *ACPO report on the National Drugs Conference*. ACPO, 1983, p.20.
5. Dorn N. *et al. Traffickers*. Routledge: 1992, p.153.
6. Source for both figures: Performance Information Bureau 5. Metropolitan Police Service. At the time of writing full figures for 1993 were unavailable.
7. Rogers M. *Indicators of drug use in Southwark*. Southwark Drug Prevention Team, 1991.