

Total number of CSEW crimes = 6.5 million

Total number of PRC crimes = 4.3 million

**Figure 6.6** The pattern of crime in official statistics: *Crime Survey for England and Wales* (CSEW) crime and police recorded crime (PRC), England and Wales, year ending June 2015

Source: *Crime in England and Wales*, Office for National Statistics, 2015

### The pattern of offending

The pattern of offences and the characteristics of offenders revealed by the various statistical sources mentioned above show that most crime is committed:

- By working-class males
- In urban areas
- By young people (a third of all those convicted in any year are aged 10–21, with the peak age for crime being 18 for males, and 14 for females)
- Against property (about 70–80 per cent of all crime).

For some offences, such as street crime and some drug offences, there is – according to official statistics – an over-representation of some minority ethnic groups, particularly black minority ethnic groups.

Despite the various limitations arising from the social construction of crime statistics, sociologists need to work with the best evidence available to them, and the rest of this topic examines explanations for some aspects of the pattern of offending shown in official statistics.

**An important note on the rest of this topic**

Many of the explanations for the patterns of crime which are referred to in the rest of this topic from this point on have been considered in Topic 1, and some will be in Topic 3. It is important that you refer to any page references indicated to ensure you have a full understanding of the points being made, as these will not be reproduced here in full.

### Ethnicity and crime

Contemporary official statistics suggest what *appear* to be higher levels of criminality among some minority ethnic groups, particularly the black (African-Caribbean) population. For example, the Ministry of Justice, in 2013, reported that, compared to white people, black people were:

- Over twice as likely to be cautioned by the police
- Around three times more likely to be arrested

**Table 6.4** Proportion of individuals at different stages of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) process by ethnic group compared to general population, England and Wales

	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese or Other	Unknown	TOTAL
Population aged 10 or over 2011	87%	3%	6%	2%	2%	–	49,443,451
Stop and searches (s1) 2011–12	67%	14%	10%	3%	1%	4.2%	1,120,084
Arrests 2011–12	79%	8%	6%	3%	1%	2%	1,235,028
Cautions 2012	84%	7%	5%	–	1%	3%	188,610
Court proceedings (indictable*) 2012	71%	8%	5%	2%	1%	13%	375,874
Convictions (indictable*) 2012	73%	7%	4%	2%	1%	12%	308,124
Sentenced to immediate custody (indictable*) 2012	71%	9%	5%	2%	2%	11%	81,082
Prison population (aged 15+) 2013	74%	13%	8%	4%	1%	–	86,067

Figures are rounded to nearest whole percentage  
 \* **Indictable offences** are more serious criminal offences that can be tried at the Crown Court (indictable only) or at the magistrates' court (either-way offences)  
 Source: *Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System; Offender Management Statistics*, Ministry of Justice, 2013

**Indictable offences** are more serious criminal offences that can be tried at the Crown Court (indictable only) or at the magistrates' court (either-way offences). These contrast with less serious Summary Offences, such as motoring offences, common assault and small-scale criminal damage up to £5,000, which are usually tried only by a magistrates' court.

- If arrested, more likely to be charged, remanded in custody, and face court proceedings than to receive a caution
- More likely, if found guilty, to receive a custodial (prison) sentence and for a longer term
- Five times more likely to be in prison.

Asians compared to white people were:

- More likely to be charged and face court proceedings than to receive a caution;
- More likely to receive a custodial sentence if found guilty and for a longer term.

Table 6.4 shows the proportions of different ethnic groups involved at various stages of the criminal justice system process.

**Activity**  
 Referring to table 6.4, analyse the data and describe what conclusions you might draw about the links between ethnicity and crime. Give figures to back up your conclusions.

Sociologists have developed a number of explanations for the higher levels of offending in some ethnic minorities shown in official statistics.

### Sociological explanations of the links between ethnicity and offending

#### Neo-Marxist approaches

**Black crime as resistance**  
 Gilroy (1982) argued that crime by black people, particularly in the 1970s, was a form of political action, representing a culture of resistance to inequality and oppressors in the form of police racism

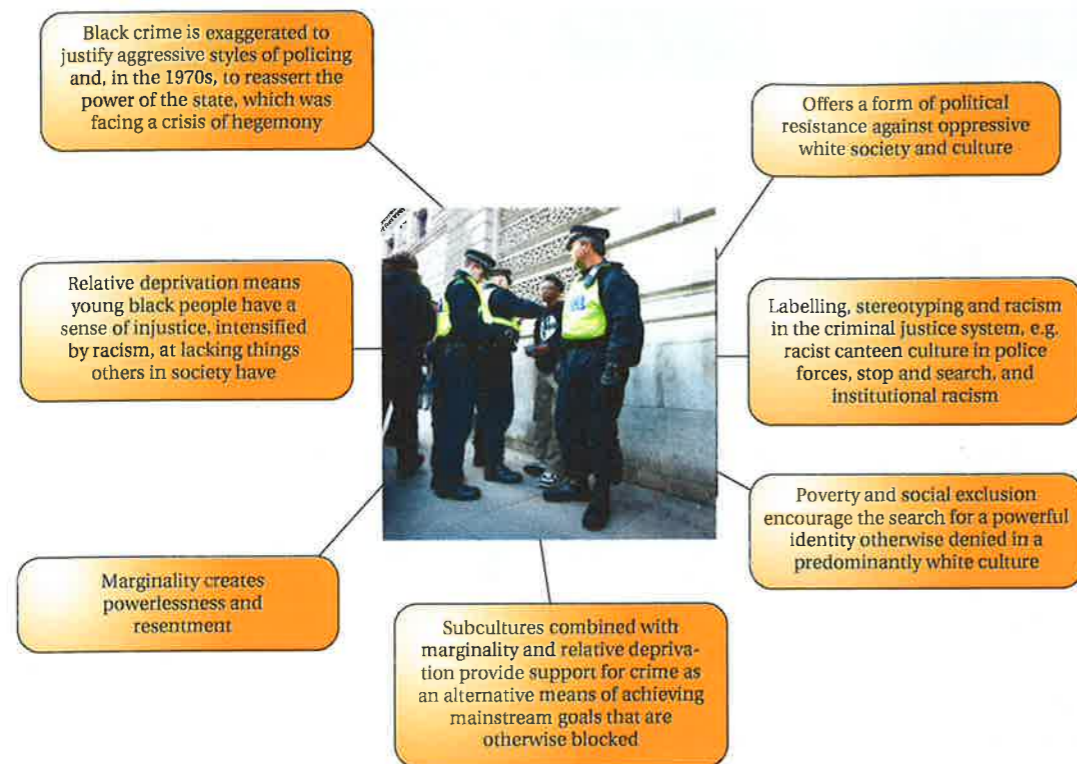


Figure 6.7 Ethnicity and crime

and harassment. He denied there was greater criminality among black people than whites, suggesting this was a myth created by negative stereotyping by the police and the media, who saw minority ethnic groups as untrustworthy, with African-Caribbean youth labelled as potential 'muggers' and Asians as potential illegal immigrants.

### Black crime and scapegoating – the crisis of hegemony and the creation of the 'black mugger'

As discussed in Topic 1 (see page 457) Hall et al. (1978) argue that in the 1970s Britain was facing an economic and political crisis which threatened the dominance of ruling-class ideology in society – a crisis of hegemony. At the same time, there was growing conflict between the police and the African-Caribbean community. This was fuelled by selective publication of crime statistics showing black youth involvement in particular offences, including street robbery (theft with actual or threatened use of force, now commonly called 'mugging'). The media picked up on this, as making good headlines, and promoted the idea that black people were more prone to criminality than whites, and the media image of the 'black mugger' was born. A moral panic developed – a media-fuelled exaggeration of the problem of black crime – with growing demands by the public that something should be done to stamp out the problem. The 'black mugger' came to be a folk devil and a scapegoat for all of society's problems. (Moral panics are discussed further on pages 518–22).

Hall et al. argued that there had not been a real increase in street robbery (mugging) but the moral panic was used to justify more repressive and aggressive policing against the black community, like repeated stop and search. All black youth were seen as a threat, even when they weren't doing anything wrong, and this generated growing distrust, and hostility and resistance to the police in the black community, which in many ways continues today. The media-exaggerated extent of black crime therefore became a means of reasserting the dominance of ruling-class ideas, and re-establishing their hegemony in society generally, as the public shared their concerns over black criminality, and this diverted people's attention from the wider crisis in British society.

In the 1970s, the 'black mugger' emerged during a crisis of hegemony of the British state, and came to symbolize all of society's problems, and also helped to justify more repressive and aggressive policing in some inner-city areas. Britain's police riot squads, using paramilitary equipment such as shields and riot sticks, first emerged in 1970s Britain.



### Evaluation of neo-Marxist explanations

While neo-Marxist theories offer an explanation for black crime, as a form of resistance and as a response to aggressive policing arising from an unjustified moral panic, there are three main criticisms.

- 1 The conflicts between minority ethnic groups, the police and criminal justice agencies and negative media stereotypes still exist, but the 'crisis of hegemony' of the 1970s does not, suggesting that the explanation is inadequate.
- 2 Gilroy seems to be imposing his own interpretation of the meaning of black crime when he describes it as a political act against oppressors. Black crime, including mugging, is often committed against other black or poor people, so it is hard to see it as resistance to oppression.
- 3 Lea and Young (1984) point out that most crimes are reported by the public, not uncovered by the police, so it is hard to explain black crime in terms of police racism.

### Left Realism

Lea and Young's Left Realist approach (see pages 465–8) accepts that black crime, for some offences, is higher than for the white population. They suggest three factors contribute to this.

- 1 **Marginality.** Some minority ethnic groups are pushed to the edges of mainstream society by underachievement in education, lack of employment or low pay, and lack of legitimate opportunities to influence events. These create resentments and a sense of powerlessness, further fuelled by the experience of racism.
- 2 **Relative deprivation.** This is most likely to be felt by those facing more deprived social situations, as many of those in minority ethnic groups do.
- 3 **Subculture.** Marginality and relative deprivation can combine in contributing to the formation of subcultures in deprived communities, which provide a form of peer-group support for young black males, and may involve gang culture, violence, and street crime as a response to the resentments and status frustration they feel.

### Poverty, social exclusion and the search for identity

Bowling and Phillips (2002) suggest higher levels of robbery by black people could be linked to poverty and social exclusion, which black communities are more likely to suffer from, and such activities can generate both peer-group status and a sense of a powerful black identity otherwise denied. Poverty and social exclusion clearly affect Asians as well, particularly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, who are among the poorest groups in British society. However, their lower crime rate may be because Asian cultures offer a much clearer cultural identity, and there are generally stronger controls within Asian families and communities, limiting the opportunities and perhaps the desire to commit crime.

### Labelling, stereotyping and racism in policing and the criminal justice system

As considered earlier, many sociologists have argued that official crime statistics are socially constructed. Labelling theorists (see pages 459–63) and Marxists (see pages 456–7) argue that statistics suggesting black and Asian people are more likely to be offenders than whites are misleading, and are evidence of selective law enforcement rather than higher rates of criminality. Racism and racist stereotypes in police culture and practice mean the behaviour of black and Asian people is more likely to be labelled as criminal, and the law selectively enforced to target them, accounting for their higher arrest rates compared to whites. In support of this view, Reiner (2000) points to a racist 'canteen culture' among the police, which includes suspicion, macho values and racism, and this encourages racist stereotypes and a mistrust of those from non-white backgrounds. From this point of view, the link between crime and ethnic minorities is a socially constructed fabrication – a product of racial prejudice and discrimination against black people and Asians by the police and other criminal justice agencies. Phillips and Bowling (2012) suggest evidence of racial discrimination is shown in the following ways.

#### Indirect racial discrimination

- 1 *Mistrust of the police.* This means minority ethnic suspects are less likely than white offenders to cooperate with police officers or prosecutors, and less likely to admit offences during interview or before trial. Refusing to admit to offences means they are ineligible for a caution or reduced sentences.
- 2 *Social position.* Minority ethnic groups are more likely than white offenders to display the social characteristics which make a remand in custody more likely than release on bail, because they are thought to be more likely to abscond. This includes factors like poor housing and a lack of community.

#### Direct racial discrimination

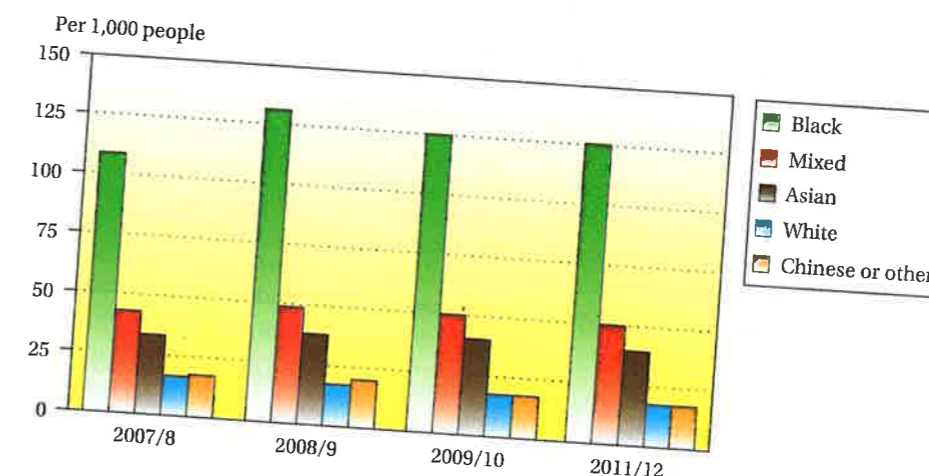
- 1 *Stop and search.* Black and Asian people, and especially youth, fit police stereotypes of 'troublemakers' and they are therefore targeted for heavier policing. Fitzgerald (1993) found police discrimination against ethnic minorities was greatest in situations where police officers had scope to exploit their own intuition, stereotypes and racial prejudices, such as stopping and searching people. The Ministry of Justice in 2013 reported that, compared to white people, Asians were twice as likely, and black people (African Caribbeans) were six times more likely (though this rises to thirty times under some police stop and search powers) to be stopped and searched by the police, as shown in figure 6.8; that this seems to be based on unjustified assumptions and racial stereotypes, rather than reasonable suspicion, is shown by the fact that only about one in ten stop and searches results in an arrest, so at least 90 per cent of 'suspects' are in fact not guilty of anything. Phillips and Bowling (2012) note that stop and search contributes to the unfair criminalization of ethnic minorities, and undermines public support for the police in their communities. The resentments created by over-policing and stop and search were one of the sparks behind the UK riots in British cities in 2011. Bowling and Phillips (2002) suggest regular stop and searches by the police can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, with higher levels of robbery among black youth arising as a response to labelling, as they act in accordance with the stereotypes the police have of them.



Black and Asian people are between twice and thirty times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched by the police.

Figure 6.8 Stop and search rates by ethnicity in England and Wales

Source: Home Office



Institutional racism refers to patterns of discrimination based on ethnicity that have become structured into social institutions.

- 2 *Institutional racism.* The investigation into the police handling of the murder of 18-year-old Stephen Lawrence by five white youths in 1993 led to the Macpherson Report in 1999. This was highly critical of the Metropolitan Police, pointing to a series of mistakes, professional incompetence, and a 'lack of urgency' and mishandling of the police investigation, including their assumption that Stephen Lawrence was involved in a street brawl rather than being the victim of an unprovoked racist attack. It pointed to the existence of **institutional racism** in the police force. The persistence of this racism in the Metropolitan Police led the Metropolitan Black Police Association, in 2008, to warn people from minority ethnic groups not to join the force, because of 'a hostile atmosphere where racism is allowed to spread'.
- 3 *Arrests, charges and court proceedings.* Police officers appear to arrest and charge some black and Asian suspects without sufficient evidence. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) are more likely to drop cases against ethnic minorities before they reach court, and those cases the CPS brings to court have a lower conviction rate than those involving white offenders. This suggests there wasn't enough evidence for the police to charge them in the first place, nor for the CPS to secure convictions as they were bringing such weak cases to court.
- 4 *Discrimination in sentencing.* Black people, compared to white offenders in the same position, face a greater likelihood both of being given a prison sentence and of receiving longer sentences.

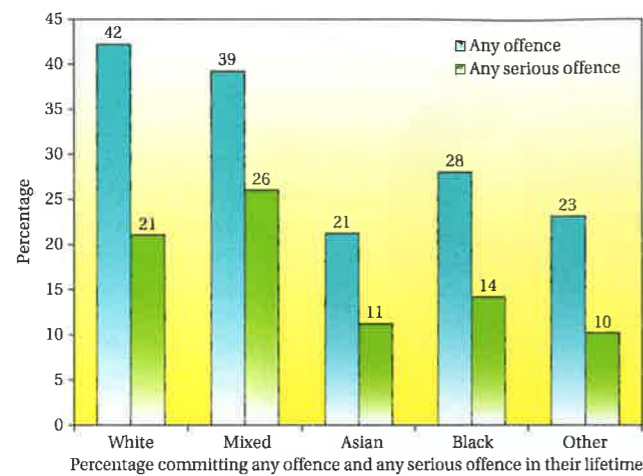


Figure 6.9 Self-reported lifetime offending (%)

Source: Sharp and Budd (2005)

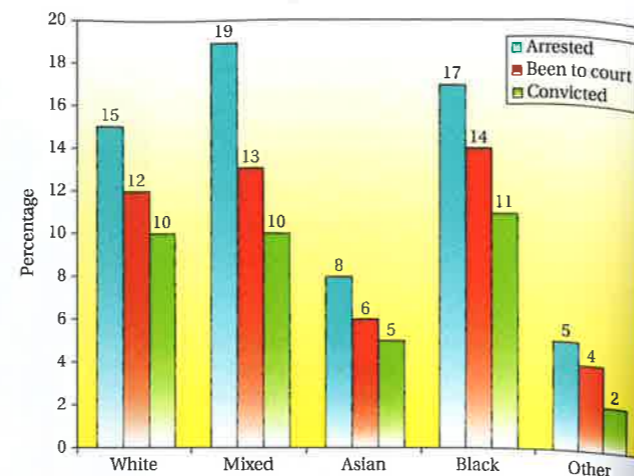


Figure 6.10 Percentage of respondents aged 10-65 who have ever been arrested, been to court, or been convicted (2003 OCJS)

Source: Sharp and Budd (2005)

5 *Over-representation in prison.* The cumulative effects of social exclusion, and direct and indirect discrimination, are shown in the disproportionate rates of imprisonment for people from minority ethnic groups. In 2013, they made up over twice the proportion of prisoners (26 per cent) compared to their proportion in the general population (12 per cent), and black people were over-represented by four times (13 per cent) compared to their 3 per cent proportion of the general population. Phillips and Bowling (2012) cite evidence showing that, in prison, black and Asian prisoners face a more brutal regime than white prisoners, including abuse, violence and intimidation, denial of earned privileges and disproportionate disciplinary action. Asian prisoners face stereotyping as 'Islamic terrorists' and as 'security risks' in prison.

Further evidence of discrimination in policing and the criminal justice system is suggested by self-report studies. Sharp and Budd (2005), based on findings from the Home Office's *2003 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS)*, found that white people had the highest rate of lifetime offending, as shown in figure 6.9, and black and Asian people were significantly less likely to offend than white respondents. For offences committed in the previous twelve months, white males aged from 10 to 25 were far more likely to have committed an offence than 10- to 25-year-old males in other ethnic groups, and were more likely to be classed as serious or frequent offenders compared to Asian or black males in this age group. Despite this generally lower level of offending, figure 6.10 shows that people of Mixed or Black ethnicity are more likely to have been arrested, been to court or been convicted in their lifetimes.

In the light of such evidence, it is perhaps then not surprising that many of those from minority ethnic groups see the criminal justice system as discriminatory, causing them to lack confidence and trust in the police, and creating the sense of grievance that Gilroy and Hall et al. first identified in the 1970s but which continues in contemporary Britain.

### Evaluation of ethnicity and crime

The links between ethnicity and offending are complex, and it is quite difficult to discover whether differences between ethnic groups are a result of their ethnic identity, or because of differences in age, social class and the areas in which they live. For example, compared to white people, minority ethnic groups tend to have higher proportions of young people, those suffering social and economic deprivation, and those living in deprived urban communities; higher crime rates may be related to these factors rather than ethnicity itself.

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence, confirmed in self-report studies, that the higher rate of offending by some minority ethnic groups shown in official statistics may be an exaggerated distortion created by racist stereotyping, unjustified assumptions and labelling by the police, and by racial discrimination in the criminal justice system.

### Activity

- Referring back to Topic 1 if necessary, explain how each of the following concepts or theories might be applied to explain apparently higher levels of criminality among some minority ethnic groups:
  - strain theory and anomie (see pages 451-2)
  - marginality and social exclusion (see pages 465-6)
  - control and rational choice and opportunity theories (see pages 454-6 and 468-9).
- Identify four pieces of evidence in each case that outline that minority ethnic groups are: (a) more involved, and (b) no more, or less, involved, in crime than the white ethnic majority.

### Gender and crime

Official statistics show that, in most countries of the world, males commit far more crime than females, in what is sometimes called the 'crime-gender gap' or the 'crime-sex ratio'. In England and Wales in 2014, men accounted for three-quarters of all persons convicted and 85 per cent of those convicted for more serious (indictable) criminal offences, and 95 per cent of prisoners. Men are convicted for about six *known* indictable offences for every one committed by women, they are more likely to be repeat offenders and in general they commit more serious offences. The proportion of men found guilty of or cautioned for indictable offences peaks at ages 17 to 20 when it is around ten times higher than the rate for women. Men are many times more likely to be found guilty of offending than women (as shown in figure 6.11) – for example:

- About sixty times more likely for sex offences
- About fourteen times more likely for robberies
- About thirteen times more likely for possession of weapons
- About ten times more likely for public order offences
- About eight times more likely for violence against the person (though it is much greater for violence which results in serious injury)
- About seven times more likely for criminal damage
- About six times more likely for all indictable offences overall
- About four times more likely for theft.

Figure 6.11 Offenders found guilty in all courts by sex and type of offence, England and Wales 2013-14

Source: Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System, Ministry of Justice, November 2014

