

# ATTITUDES OF PEOPLE FROM MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES TOWARDS A CAREER IN THE POLICE SERVICE

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## Background

Whilst there are now more people from minority ethnic communities in the police service compared with ten years ago, the proportions remain low. This research was commissioned by the Home Office in the light of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report (1999). In response to the recommendations in the report, the Home Office had drawn up targets for all police forces in England and Wales in their recruitment of people from minority ethnic communities. The targets reflected the profile of the economically active population in the local area (see Race Equality - The Home Secretary's Employment Targets, 1999). However, little up-to-date information was available about the attitudes of people from different minority ethnic communities towards a career with the police. This research sought to identify the main factors influencing people's attitudes towards a career in the police service and to examine how these might influence recruitment strategies.

## Research aims and methodology

The research had two key aims:

1. To identify the main factors influencing the attitudes of minority ethnic communities towards a career in the police service; and
2. To assess how future force recruitment strategies might best help meet targets set for minority ethnic recruitment.

The study adopted a wholly qualitative methodology and was carried out by BMRB between January and May 2000. Thirty-two focus groups were undertaken, involving a total of 290 people aged 18-30 from different minority ethnic communities. Each focus group was held with people who had selected the same option from a list of ethnicity classifications. All the researchers

involved in facilitating the focus group discussions were from minority ethnic groups themselves.

## Summary of findings

Men and women from different minority ethnic communities, of different age groups, and living in different geographical areas, were more similar to each other than different in their attitudes towards a police service career. Highlighted where relevant are the findings which seemed to differ for men and women, and for different minority ethnic groups, for example Pakistani and Bangladeshi women or black Caribbean respondents. Also highlighted are differences related to religious belief for practising Muslims.

### *Career expectations and perceptions of working in the police service*

- Respondents put forward a host of attributes that they looked for in a job or career. Good pay and satisfying work were foremost in their minds, but a career with good prospects and getting on with their colleagues were also important. Pay was not necessarily the most important criterion. In terms of police work, safety was also an important factor. Practising Muslims were concerned that their need to pray be accommodated at work, and some had selected their current job on this basis.
- There was very limited awareness amongst respondents of what police work actually involved, but there was a desire to know more. People tended to associate policing with the role of police officer on the beat and knew little of other types of work in the service, such as that carried out by support staff.
- The job of police officer was attractive to some respondents because it was thought to offer variety,

challenge and excitement, whilst others saw it as a career with financial security. Respect and status were sometimes associated with the job and regarded as desirable. Some, particularly women, saw policing as an opportunity to work with their local community and contribute to society.

- A variety of skills were seen as desirable in the police including good communication skills, fairness in the conduct of their work, respect for the people they come into contact with, and the confidence to do the job. However, respondents perceived a fair degree of mismatch between these personal qualities and those presented by police officers.
- Asian women perceived a special contribution that they could make in supporting women experiencing domestic violence, and in terms of their interactions with other Asian women more generally during police work.
- Attractive aspects of police work could, however, be far outweighed by the drawbacks envisaged. Respondents were discouraged by the following perceptions:
  - The thought of having to work in a racist environment, having to face prejudice from both colleagues and the general public on a daily basis.
  - The isolation of minority ethnic police officers in a predominantly white male culture leading to them having to deny their cultural identity in order to fit in.
  - The dangers of the job and having to deal with unpleasant situations coupled with a lack of confidence in (racist) colleagues assisting them in circumstances where their life or physical safety were at risk.
  - The anticipated reactions of friends or family, who they thought might be disappointed, fearful for their safety, and perhaps hostile; they also felt that minority ethnic police officers might be put under unreasonable pressure to reveal sensitive and confidential information.
  - Concerns, because of pressure expected from the local community, to decide where their loyalties were and, for Asian Muslim women with strong religious beliefs, whether the job was appropriate for a woman.
  - Anxiety for black and Asian women about being subjected to both sexism and racism if they joined the police.
  - A perception that minority ethnic police officers have few or no promotion prospects, which, in

turn would limit their chances of getting the financial rewards associated with the higher ranks of the police service.

- On balance, other jobs were perceived to offer respondents greater opportunities, particularly in terms of promotion and pay, and without the fear of danger or racism.
- Support staff jobs in the police were not associated with racism or danger and, therefore, had an appeal for some respondents in terms of future career plans. They also thought such jobs would offer an opportunity to be respected for their expertise in a particular field.

#### *People who had previously considered a police career*

- Some people had decided against a job with the police, partly because of misconceptions, for example that there was still a minimum height requirement, but also because they had been put under pressure by their families. Fear of abuse from the general public was also a deciding factor, as was a belief that they would not get through the training. In some cases other jobs were more attractive. Respondents also believed people from minority ethnic communities were not getting a positive response when they applied.
- A few people in each of the focus groups said they had tried to apply to join the police and remarked on the difficulties they had in accessing the recruitment process, with a lack of follow-up and feedback at key points. A few felt that racism had been a deciding factor in their unsuccessful applications.

#### *Views of the police organisation, its staff and service delivery*

- Respondents talked about a prevailing police culture that was predominantly white and male, and excluding of those who were different. There were varied opinions as to the level of racism in the police, and in particular whether it was any more prevalent than in wider society, but its existence was not questioned. Perceptions ranged from 'inherently racist' to 'an intransigent minority'. Respondents agreed, however, that the power vested in the police, and the responsibilities they have, meant that the police had to be seen to be better than other institutions.
- The police were thought not to understand people who had different cultures from their own, and to stereotype people from minority ethnic communities. Moreover, respondents perceived the police to make little effort to understand different cultures among their local community.
- Negative perceptions of the police were based on

personal experiences both as victims of crime and as a result of the police use of stop and search. Respondents were concerned about their experiences, particularly the attitudes of police officers, which were sometimes put down to racism on the part of the police. References were also made to experiences of friends and family and the impact of the mass media, for example, in relation to police corruption and the Stephen Lawrence case.

- Respondents were keen not to generalise the bad experiences they had with the police to all police officers. There were accounts of positive experiences with both helpful and supportive police officers, but negative experiences appeared to be more memorable. Even so, a positive experience had led a respondent to consider joining the police.
- There was little awareness of any steps the police might have taken to tackle racism in the police, leading respondents to question the service's commitment to dealing with discrimination and prejudice. A perceived lack of action led respondents to believe that minority ethnic police officers dropped out of the police because of racism both from their colleagues and the general public. There was also a perception that racism lay behind the lack of minority ethnic faces among the senior ranks.

*Strategies suggested by respondents to encourage people from minority ethnic communities to join the police*

- Some respondents emphasised that racism in the police would need to be tackled before they would consider police work - this was a recurring theme. Many of their suggestions are already in place, or being introduced by forces, highlighting a lack of public awareness of the attempts made by the police to attract applicants from minority ethnic communities. Respondents' suggestions are listed below:
  - The police need to be taking steps publicly to deal with racism.
  - Racism should be severely dealt with and an independent panel should oversee how racism is handled in the police.
  - The recruitment process needs to identify and exclude racists.
  - Training needs to address racism directly.
  - The way police stops and searches are handled needs to be addressed.
  - The police need to raise their awareness of other cultures.

- More people from minority ethnic communities should be recruited and promoted on merit.
- Support structures should be available for minority ethnic police officers, particularly those experiencing racism.
- Police officers should be able to choose where they work (within or away from their local community).
- Different cultural needs should be accommodated and understood, such as adaptations to dress and places to pray.
- Respondents felt the recruitment process needed to be overhauled by:
  - making information about recruitment more accessible;
  - providing more information about police work and training;
  - talking to potential recruits face-to-face;
  - being more proactive in schools and colleges;
  - presenting police work as a career rather than a job; and
  - re-thinking the recruitment advertising used by the police.
- Respondents in Bangladeshi, black, Indian and Pakistani groups remarked on the appeal of television adverts for Army recruitment. The focus on intellectual abilities and the challenge to the individual, as well as using actors from minority ethnic communities, were viewed positively.

*Views of the Home Office targets*

Respondents were asked for their opinion of the targets set by the Home Office for the recruitment of people from minority ethnic communities.

- Respondents felt that increasing the numbers of officers from minority ethnic communities in the police (which might require a focused campaign) would be an attraction to people to join in itself. However, participants were keen to emphasise that seeing more people from minority ethnic communities in positions of influence in the police would send a clear message that promotion was a real possibility.
- Respondents were cynical about the sentiments behind the targets, but some felt that issues such as racism were at last being openly addressed and the targets were a start.

- There was a strong view that it was more important for the police to recruit people with the right personalities and attitudes, regardless of their ethnic background. Respondents were also keen that people from minority ethnic groups should be seen to be recruited on merit rather than for reasons of positive discrimination.

Participants' views were informed by personal experience of policing tactics such as stops and searches, or as victims of crime, but also through indirect knowledge of police activity from family and friends, and the local and national media.

## Points for action

### *Key implications for police recruitment strategies*

- Respondents in the study did not dismiss the police service as a career, although forces have to overcome perceptions of unchecked racism. Respondents' attitudes to the police as an employer were clearly linked to their views of the service delivered by the organisation. Recruitment should therefore be seen as the responsibility of all employees of the service and not just those employed as specialists in human resources.

- Thorough monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are needed to identify and address any problems applicants experience with the recruitment process, once they reach the stage of expressing an interest in a police service career.

- National advertising, and carefully targeted local advertising were found to be important in order to convince respondents that the service was serious about wishing to recruit them. The Home Office used the findings of this study to inform a national recruitment campaign. Local advertising might also be used to promote initiatives which address respondents' concerns about policing tactics and joining the service.

*“The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).”*

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