

# The drivers of Black and Asian people's perceptions of racial discrimination by public services:

## A qualitative study

### Background

It is not possible for public services to be modern, fair and effective if significant sections of the population perceive them as discriminatory. The Government aims to bring about measurable improvements in perceptions of racial discrimination in public services. To that effect, it set a target to decrease the proportion of people of minority ethnic backgrounds who expect to be treated worse than people of other races by one or more of eight key public services and in the labour market, as measured by the Citizenship Survey. The 2005 Citizenship Survey showed no significant improvements on the overall measure since 2001, although there were significant reductions in the proportions who thought that the police, prison service, courts or Crown Prosecution Service, as individual services, discriminated against them. However, results from the April – September 2007 Citizenship Survey, alongside which this report is being published, show that there has been a significant improvement on this measure: the proportion of people from minority ethnic groups who feel that they would be treated worse than other races by at least one of eight public service organisations was 34 per cent compared with 38 per cent in 2001. This qualitative study was commissioned to understand why there had been no improvements between 2001 and 2005 and what can be done to improve perceptions of racial discrimination of public services.

race, cohesion  
and faiths

---

## Aims of the research

The aim of the research was to understand better the key drivers of Black and Asian people's perceptions of racial discrimination in eight key public services: council housing departments and housing associations, local schools, local doctors' surgeries, the police service, the prison service, the courts, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the probation service.

Three key questions guided the research:

- What role do personal beliefs, level of awareness and understanding play in explaining perceptions of racial discrimination by the public services?
- What are the most influential drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination by the public services?
- How can people's perceptions of racial discrimination by the public services be improved?

The research focused exclusively on people's perceptions. It makes no assessment about the validity of these perceptions and the extent to which specific services actually discriminate or not against people of minority ethnic backgrounds.

## Methodology

The research design used qualitative methods: individual in-depth interviews, incorporating the use of vignettes of ambiguous scenarios. Qualitative methods were used because they generate rich data and allow us to gain a detailed understanding of respondents' attitudes and experiences. However, they are not suitable for gathering statistical data that can be inferred to the wider population. Each interviewee was presented with three scenarios in which a Black or Asian person is in contact with public services. The scenarios were designed specifically to be ambiguous with respect to racial discrimination, so that respondents' reactions could be taken as a measure of their understanding of and

sensitivity to racial discrimination. Interviewees were then asked to discuss in detail their expectations of fairness or racial discrimination in public services, in the labour market and in wider society.

One-hundred and twenty (120) people took part in the research. Respondents were selected from a database of Black and Asian people who had taken part in the 2005 Citizenship Survey and had agreed to be recontacted for research purposes. Respondents were selected to ensure that there was a spread of people in the following categories:

- Black and Asian ethnic groups
- aged under 35, and 35 and above
- both genders
- higher and lower socio-economic group
- different regional groupings, including a group living in areas of low minority ethnic population
- levels of expected discrimination by public services, as defined by respondents' previous answers to the Citizenship Survey.

The fieldwork was carried out between April and June 2006.

## Findings

Perceptions of racial discrimination were found to be an outcome of the interaction between psychosocial factors, on the one hand, and service-specific factors, on the other.

### *Psychosocial drivers of perceptions*

The psychosocial factors which were found to impact on perceptions of discrimination or fairness were the respondents':

- self-concept
- view of the world

- understanding of racial discrimination
- sensitivity to racial discrimination
- sources and types of knowledge.

Respondents who perceived and expected racial discrimination in many public services tended to:

- have a self-concept based on a politicised (racial or religious) social identity
- assume that the world is not “just” and have a sceptical attitude towards public services
- have a complex understanding of racial discrimination which combines personal and structural components
- be sensitive to racial discrimination across various contexts
- draw on personal and vicarious experiences, informal and formal knowledge, and the media to elaborate their perceptions.

Respondents who perceived and expected racial discrimination in few or no public services tended to:

- have a self-concept based on a personal identity or a non-politicised social identity
- assume that the world is “just” and have a trusting attitude towards public services
- have a limited understanding of racial discrimination focused predominantly on attitudes and behaviours displayed in personal interactions
- be insensitive to racial discrimination across various contexts
- draw mainly on personal and vicarious experiences to elaborate their perceptions.

These psychosocial drivers of perceptions impacted on perceptions of racial discrimination in British society as a whole, in the labour market and in public services.

### *Service-specific drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination*

Other drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination derived more directly from people’s knowledge and experience of specific public services. These are listed below for each service. The issues in italics are the most important drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination for each particular service (as determined both by the frequency with which they were mentioned and the strength of feeling they evoked in the respondents). The ethnic background of the respondents most likely to identify these drivers is noted in brackets.

- **In housing services, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - *Allocation policies: Perceptions of prioritisation of refugees* (Black and Asian people)
  - Allocation policies: Perceptions that ethnic minority households are accommodated in worse areas and properties than White households (mainly Asian people).
- **In local GP services, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - Perceived discrimination from Asian doctors towards Asian patients (only Asian people).
- **In local schools, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - *The mismanagement of racial and/or religious incidents against pupils* (Black and Asian people)
  - Lower expectations of schools from Black pupils (only Black people)
  - Disproportionate exclusion and detention amongst Black pupils (only Black people).
- **In the police service, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - *Basic distrust, associated with the case of Stephen Lawrence and an undercover television reportage on racism in the police service (“The Secret Policeman”)* (Black and Asian people)

- *Disproportionate stop and searches amongst minority ethnic people* (Black and Asian people)
- *Perceived lack of accountability: associated with the case of Jean-Charles de Menezes* (Black and Asian people)
- Greater number of minority ethnic deaths in custody: associated with the case of Christopher Alder (mainly Black people)
- Perceived unwillingness of the police service to deal with crimes against minority ethnic people (mainly Black people)
- Poor retention of minority ethnic staff: associated with the case of Gurpal Viridi (Black and Asian people).
- **In the CPS, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - *Basic distrust of the Criminal Justice System, based on views of the police* (Black and Asian people)
  - *Perceived lack of independence from the police* (mainly Black people)
  - *Harsher sentences for minority ethnic people, although sentencing decisions are not made by the CPS and there was some confusion about the CPS' role* (mainly Black people)
  - Perceived lack of transparency in decision-making (Black and Asian people).
- **In the courts, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - Basic distrust of the Criminal Justice System, based on views of the police (Black and Asian people)
  - *Harsher sentences for minority ethnic people* (mainly Black people)
  - *Socio-demographic profile of judges* (Black and Asian people)
  - *Perception that anti-terrorism legislation discriminates against Muslims, although the framing of the legislation is not the responsibility of the courts* (only Asian people)
- Perceived lack of training for magistrates (mainly Asian people).
- **In the prison service, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - *Perceived lack of accountability* (Black and Asian people)
  - *Verbal and physical abuse of inmates by White prison officers* (Black and Asian people)
  - *Knowledge of deaths in custody: associated with the case of Zahid Mubarek* (mainly Asian people)
  - Unequal access to parole (mainly Black people).
- **In the probation service, the main drivers of perceptions of racial discrimination were:**
  - Basic distrust of the Criminal Justice System, based on views of the police (mainly Black people).

Overall, the research established that amongst respondents who expected discriminatory treatment in no or few public services, perceptions of fairness were more likely to be based on basic trust than on evidence of fairness in the services. These respondents were rarely able to articulate the reasons why they perceived services to be fair. In the absence of personal experiences of racial discrimination, and without much knowledge about many of the services (let alone the level of fairness or discrimination that may exist in each public service), they simply assumed that the services were fair.

By contrast, respondents who expected discrimination in many public services were usually able to state very specific reasons to justify their perceptions. They also carefully distinguished between services, between individual service providers, between areas, between poor and specifically discriminatory service, as well as between discrimination based on class, gender, race and religion. They were also better able to discuss why they deemed certain public services to be fair than respondents who expected no public services to discriminate against them. The majority of the respondents who perceived discrimination from

many public services were responsive to positive changes in public services. Only a small minority of respondents had deeply entrenched negative perceptions of public services that were unresponsive to changes. This indicates that reductions in actual inequalities in service provisions and delivery should also generate improvements in perceptions of fairness, although this is unlikely to happen quickly and uniformly.

## Recommendations

Recommendations can be clustered into three themes: structural mechanisms, front-line service delivery and communications.

### *Structural mechanisms*

- The focus on perceptions of structural racial discrimination amongst “high” and some “medium” discrimination respondents suggests that, in order to ensure that public services are indeed fairer in the long term, considerable efforts need to be put into building confidence in and strengthening structural mechanisms such as those discussed below.
- **Involvement and consultation:** Public services should seek to involve and consult minority ethnic people at every stage in service planning and delivery to ensure that services truly meet the diverse needs of the communities they serve.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Public services should have in place rigorous monitoring mechanisms to identify any evidence of unequal treatment, processes and outcomes, and the results of monitoring should be used to help plan and deliver fairer services.
- **Transparency:** Public services need to be seen to plan and deliver their services based on fair and explicit criteria.
- **Accountability:** Public services should ensure that they have effective complaints procedures so that they are seen to have a zero-tolerance

approach to discrimination, and so that the public is reassured that any instance of perceived racial discrimination can be investigated and that redress can be obtained (if relevant).

Independent external bodies (acting as regulators, inspectors or auditors) have an important positive impact on trust and perceptions of fairness in public services, and their remit should clearly encompass race equality.

### *Front-line service delivery*

- Emphasis should be put on improving fairness in public services themselves, as people’s perceptions of racial discrimination are mainly grounded in their experiences and knowledge of specific services, rather than in their experiences in wider society or in the labour market.
- Public services should ensure that they provide professional, courteous and culturally-sensitive customer service to all, especially in face-to-face interactions.
- Public services should continue to strive to have a workforce that is representative of the population that they serve, as the mere presence of minority ethnic staff is interpreted both as a sign and a guarantee that public services do not discriminate.

### *Communications*

- Good communications strategies should be in place to ensure that significant progress towards reducing inequalities in public services is perceived as such by the public. There is a need to diffuse, through the mass media, “hard” evidence of progress towards greater fairness.
- There is little understanding of the need for public sector provisions that meet the specific needs of diverse service users. Greater efforts are necessary to communicate the rationale for such provisions.

- Public services should communicate their willingness to be held accountable for any racial discrimination that may occur as they discharge their functions. Findings from reports and inquiries carried out by independent external bodies (regulators, inspectors or auditors) should be effectively publicised.
- To improve perceptions of fairness in the groups that, in this research, were most likely to perceive discrimination from public services (eg Muslim people, Black Caribbean people), there is a need for more targeted communications (eg community consultation events, campaigns in specialist media) to address the specific concerns of these groups.

The full report includes further recommendations for individual services, and explores the various ways in which drivers of perceptions could be ranked to determine priorities for action.

### Further information

Further information is contained in the full report: *The drivers of Black and Asian People's perceptions of racial discrimination by public services: A qualitative study*, available from the Communities and Local Government website:

**[www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)**

Communities and Local Government  
Publications  
PO Box No 236  
Wetherby LS23 7NB  
Tel: 08701 226 236  
Fax: 08701 226 237  
Email: [Communities@twoten.com](mailto:Communities@twoten.com)

**75% recycled**

This is printed on  
75% recycled paper

Published by the Department for Communities and Local Government.

© Crown copyright, 2008.

Product code: 07ELMAT05012/a.