



Why Do They Do It? Racial Harassment in North Staffordshire

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Why Do They Do It?

Racial Harassment in North Staffordshire

Key Findings

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Why do they do it?

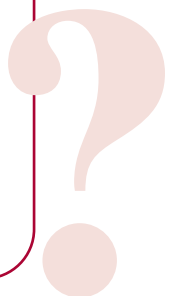
Racial Harassment in North Staffordshire

Background

This report documents key findings from a study based in North Staffordshire, funded by an Economic and Social Research Council grant (ref: RES-000-23-0171) and conducted by researchers from Keele University. The main aim of the research was to study the social contexts in which racial harassment takes place and the motivations of those responsible for committing it. Fieldwork for the research took place between January and October 2004, and involved in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving a total of more than one hundred people. Pseudonyms are used to refer to all research participants in this report.

Key Points

- Thinking and talking in terms of 'us' and 'them', people who belong and people who do not, is common among people of all ages in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire. Many white people in North Staffordshire feel disrespected and believe that they are the main victims of racial discrimination.
- Industrial decline and social change have led to many people in North Staffordshire feeling a sense of loss, a sense that a whole way of life has gone, never to return. For them, the present is unsettling and the future uncertain.
- Few people, including those convicted of racially aggravated crimes, see themselves as 'racists'. The vast majority of people do not condone racist attacks. Yet many people associate immigration and the descendants of immigrants with everything that is wrong with their lives. The presence of migrant and minority ethnic populations is widely seen in North Staffordshire as an emblem of decline, and an uncomfortable reminder of local white people's inability to secure decent lives for themselves and their families.
- Perpetrators' life stories reveal patterns of severe, occasionally extreme, material and emotional deprivation combined with, or compounded by, histories of other kinds of offending behaviour, criminalisation, domestic violence, mental illness, and the abuse of drugs and alcohol.
- Whilst their behaviours had been intimidating and/or dangerous, those perpetrators who had been convicted of racially aggravated offences were typical of the general population of offenders in that they tended to be male, young, poor, emotionally damaged and socially marginal.
- Living in communities where many white people feel disrespected, some of North Staffordshire's most disadvantaged and emotionally damaged residents feel inclined, sometimes compelled, to project their feelings of shame, envy and disgust - often aggressively, sometimes violently - onto migrant and minority ethnic groups.



Perpetrators

Fifteen people who had been implicated in acts of racial harassment in Stoke-on-Trent took part in in-depth biographical interviews. We describe these 15 people here as 'perpetrators' although we accept that some of them would not recognise themselves as such. Twelve members of our sample were identified by Staffordshire Probation Service and local Youth Offending Teams, although only seven of these 12 had ever been charged with, or convicted of, racially aggravated crimes. Of the three members of the sample not recruited through criminal justice agencies, one - a British National Party activist - was recruited from one of our focus groups. This person helped us to recruit a second interviewee active in a local campaign against the dispersal of asylum seekers to the Potteries. Another perpetrator who had been a member of the National Front before standing for the BNP in local elections was recruited by writing to him directly. Only two of those recruited through criminal justice agencies also had associations with far-right organisations, both having contacted extremist groups through the internet. Only one of the other ten interviewees contacted through criminal justice agencies openly expressed support for a far-right organisation.

Although seven or more of our 15 interviewees had, at some point in their lives, been routinely involved in violent crime, none could justifiably be characterised as specialist racially motivated offenders. Drunkenness, illicit drug consumption, drug-dealing, and territorial and school-based loyalties were more typical features of the violence in which members of our sample were implicated. Of the total sample of 15, five of our interviewees had been diagnosed with some kind of mental illness - including chronic or manic forms of depression. At least three had suffered paranoid delusions. Predictably, many of our respondents had experienced unhappy childhoods, been excluded from school or were regular truants. Eight out of 15 of them disclosed childhood experiences of abuse, neglect, and/or domestic violence. Nine members of the sample were from homes 'broken' by divorce, separation and/or death.

Racist attitudes, hate and denial

Our research found that criminal justice outcomes were often a poor indicator of racist attitudes. Some of the least racist interviewees we met had convictions for racially aggravated crimes, whilst some of the more racist interviewees had none. In fact, the stories most of our interviewees told suggested that racism was rarely, if ever, the sole factor motivating their offending behaviour and/or political activism. This was not simply because our perpetrators were 'in denial' about their racism. Only two of our interviewees (Marcus and Shahid) provided accounts that suggested that they were denying the racism evident at the time the incidents in question occurred. Moreover, one of our respondents, Alan, appeared to have been convicted in circumstances where either the evidence of racial aggravation had been fabricated by the victim, or where a psychotic bout Alan was suffering led him to use racist language to which he would ordinarily object. Conversely, a number of the younger white males (e.g. Greg, Paul, Steve, Stan) in our sample were relatively open about what they had done and unguarded in their often (but by no means universally) negative evaluations of different ethnic groups.

There was probably only one offender (Stan) in our sample who could justifiably be accused of deploying race as a primary justification for violence, but even his behaviour could only be understood when contextualised in terms of his experiences of injustice and victimisation. Stan was a 19 year-old prisoner who conceded that he was a 'proper little racist back in school', who 'hate[d] Pakis' and wished that he was still involved with the National Front. When it came to accounting for the brutal attack Stan had made on a worker in a Turkish kebab shop the breaching of standards of both sexual and racial propriety were at stake. The story that unfolded was about Stan's desire to punish a 'Paki bastard' who had made suggestive remarks to a younger (white) woman with whom he (Stan) had had a sexual relationship. Stan's story also told of a life scarred by domestic violence, sexual abuse, drug-taking and involvement in organised crime.

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Gender, heterosexism and racial propriety

Typically, the meaning of what appeared to be racially motivated offending or racist political activism only made sense when placed in the context of the alleged perpetrator's wider experiences with minority ethnic groups and the white majority population. Issues of gender and sexuality featured in many of the stories we heard. Belinda, an 18 year-old probationer, complained about refugees 'gawping' at her, as well as black and Asian men who have 'no respect for women'. She also pointed to examples of friends of hers who had been sexually harassed or physically beaten by men from ethnic minority groups. Conversely, Greg complained about a Turkish man who had chased his younger sister because their brother had stolen from him. When he saw a white woman at the Turkish man's window Greg threw a glass bottle at her. Recalling his thoughts at the time of the incident Greg had this to say:

The cheeky twat ... taking my white woman ... my race ... I don't mind about black men ... they can have as many white women as they want. It's just Asians, Turks, Albanians, whatever you want to call them ... I don't like seeing them with white women.

Conversely, Emma, a 28-year old street robber of mixed ethnicity, had on many occasions been called 'a dirty lesbian' by black and Asian men in her neighbourhood. When she was younger, Emma had sent a letter purporting to be from the National Front to one of the black men who had harassed her saying that he was 'going to get slaughtered'. Ten years later, the racially aggravated assault, for which Emma was currently on probation, had taken place after an exchange of similar racial and sexual slurs between her and four Pakistani men, none of whom had been arrested or prosecuted.

Injustice, deprivation and paranoia

The themes of less eligibility and unequal treatment surfaced in many of our interviews. Paul, a 15 year-old aspiring member of the BNP, was particularly aggrieved by Asian youth ('dirty little things') who denied him access to play areas in a local park. However, Paul also got on well with the Asian shopkeepers who gave him credit. He was most concerned with immigrants who were 'claiming taxes' and 'not working', unlike his parents who had 'worked all their lives'. This discourse about the 'burden' imposed by immigrants on public services was often evoked in interviewees' rehearsals of common myths about the benefits non-whites were assumed to be receiving. Darren, a disqualified driver and errant father fantasized about putting a 'bomb' to the 'Pakis' - whom he believed claim 'for everything' for their '90,000 children' - and was enraged by rumours that asylum seekers were getting free driving lessons from which he could have benefited.

Others complained of unequal treatment by criminal justice practitioners. Marcus, a 22-year-old prisoner, explained that he was a victim of racial harassment by a group of immigrant men who had told him to stay away from the 'half-Asian' woman his friend was dating. Marcus claimed that these men, with whom he and a friend had fought, had benefited from a system loaded in their favour: 'If they say you are being racist, you can't get out of it'. Marcus claimed that his experiences of a biased criminal justice system had destroyed his sympathy for the Asian people he had grown up alongside.

Both the Asian men in our sample had similar complaints. Kamron, a 17 year-old British Bangladeshi and one-time cocaine dealer, had been remanded in custody for eight months for a racially aggravated assault on a boy who had daubed racist graffiti on their school walls even though the boy conceded that Kamron had never said anything racist to him. Similarly, Shahid, a 22 year-old man of Pakistani descent who had been disqualified for drink driving, complained that when the police approached the scene of an altercation in which he was not involved, they had singled him out for

questioning because he was the 'only Asian there'. Shahid had been prosecuted for calling the arresting officers 'white bastards' and for threatening to 'kill their wives', but felt that these were 'defensive' responses to the over-zealous and demeaning treatment to which the police had subjected him.

Two of those with drink problems indicated that paranoia sometimes fuelled their racism. Steve, a 16 year old in trouble for a range of anti-social behaviours had 'filled in' three 'Kosovans' who had looked at him whilst he was drunk. He also claimed that they had muttered incomprehensibly in their own language before he started behaving in a threatening way towards them. Likewise, Carl, a 25 year-old recovering alcoholic, complained about the asylum-seekers living in a nearby hostel who walked around in groups for their own protection, and whose presence made him feel nervous when he had not drunk enough to boost his confidence. Carl was on probation for calling a female police officer, who had arrested him for drunk and disorderly behaviour, a 'black bitch'. Having previously been arrested and imprisoned for crimes he claimed not to have committed, Carl felt aggrieved with the police, but insisted that he did not feel hostile towards established minority groups. Indeed, he expressed envious admiration for a group of Asian children who had thrown milk bottles at him because their mothers, unlike his own (a 'dark-skinned' woman whom he had not seen since infancy) disciplined their children. Steve's views on established minorities were also broadly positive. He had 'always' got on with 'black' people, 'black' being a term he used broadly to include Asians. His 'best mate' was black, and he enjoyed going 'rabbiting' with local gypsies. It was only 'Kosovans' that Steve did not like, because they 'come over here to get benefits'. But even here Steve made an exception: a Kosovan lad was the only person at work with whom Steve felt he could 'have a laugh'.

Safety, respect and 'blatant' racism

This kind of qualified racism ran through most of the accounts our interviewees provided and was often contrasted with what one of the BNP candidates (Frank, aged 44) described as the 'blatant racism' inherent in discriminating against all non-white people, including those born in Stoke. Frank himself had parted company with the BNP when he discovered that the party excluded 'black and half-caste' people from membership. Likewise, Belinda, who complained about the threat posed to women by ethnic minority men, was just as critical of white boys 'who talk as if they're black and wear all the big gold'. Greg, despite his qualms about 'asylum-seekers' who steal 'his white women', and despite having been in numerous fights with Asians whom he felt were laying claim to 'his' school and 'his' town, said he was not racist because he had 'got Asian mates in Leicester and that ... they are sound. I used to ... sell skunk to them'. Meanwhile, Kamron, despite his experiences of white racism, felt sorry for those poor white people whose communities had been blighted by drugs. Kamron was also the most critical of 'Kosovans', whom he branded, somewhat contradictorily, as 'tramps', affluent tax-evaders, 'rapists' and 'desperados'. Kosovans had, in Kamron's view, given the local Asian community a bad name, something he felt justified his burglary of a Kosovan's flat.

It is these qualifiers that explain why 'respect' and 'safety' were as common as themes as 'hate' in many of the life stories we elicited. Among our sample of perpetrators, feelings of hatred were often inspired by what they perceived to be other people's disrespectful or threatening behaviours. From perpetrators' perspectives the violence in which they were implicated had been provoked by threats to their safety. Most of those within our sample who were routinely violent were young people who were generally not 'well respected' by their teachers, parents, the police, or other adults in authority. Most of those respondents who engaged in racist violence could also recall earlier periods in their lives when older people had compromised their safety and those in positions of authority had not acted appropriately in response. For Terry (aged 64), the anti-asylum activist and Nigel (aged 48), the BNP campaigner, the perceived disrespect shown by both the council and young Asian people for local war memorials and graveyards was their greatest source of anger and frustration.

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The Community

The aim of the focus group discussions was to explore the social context in which racially motivated violence and harassment takes place. During the course of the research we held 13 discussions involving a total of 86 people from 'naturally occurring' groups in and around Stoke-on-Trent. Groups included members of a residents' association, a group of young offenders, users of youth clubs, a working men's club, and a day centre. Well over half of our respondents had lived in the area all their lives. Only 32 of our 86 participants were in either full- or part-time work. Although we organised two discussions with groups of people actively involved in working against racism and two made up entirely of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, the main focus of this report is on the nine discussions held with ordinary members of the white population. The wider issues raised by the four remaining focus groups will be discussed in subsequent publications.

Life in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire

Participants in our focus groups offered an overwhelmingly negative assessment of life in Stoke-on-Trent and the surrounding area. Younger people dismissed it as a 'shithole', a 'dump', 'crap'. Their elders compared Stoke-on-Trent today unfavourably with the city they had grown up in, though many paid tribute to the enduring friendliness of its people and could not contemplate living anywhere else. Major industries - pottery, coal, steel and large-scale manufacturing - had closed, to be replaced by call centres, distribution hubs and retail. Skilled, relatively well-paid jobs had been lost, and stable, self-sustaining communities broken up. Mining villages and vibrant commercial centres full of hard-working, respectable people had been reduced to wastelands. At the mercy of 'absentee landlords' and uncaring housing providers, such places had become 'dumping grounds' for 'foreigners' and 'riff-raff'. Parts of the city had come to resemble a 'war zone', 'Beirut', 'Africa' or 'Bombay'.

For most older people, evidence of a decline in social discipline was everywhere. Children respected no-one, while parents and police alike seemed to lack either the will or the capacity to do anything to control them. Drugs were ubiquitous, and binge-drinking and violence the apparently inevitable by-products of the burgeoning night-time economy of a hitherto tranquil market town like Newcastle-under-Lyme. By turns self-serving, uncaring, and incapable of delivering adequate and affordable public services, national and local politicians were distrusted by people of all ages. Local councillors were accused of being out of touch with their constituents, favouring certain areas and allowing Stoke-on-Trent to fall far behind other cities. Indeed, for some older respondents, Stoke-on-Trent did not exist as a city at all: invisible to outsiders and divided against itself by historic rivalries, Stoke-on-Trent had more in common with the northern mill towns than larger, more dynamic cities like Manchester and Birmingham.

Identity: 'us' and 'them'

Young and old alike associated industrial decline and social change with the presence of people they saw as outsiders, sometimes from elsewhere in the city or other parts of Britain, but most frequently from southern and eastern Europe, the Middle East, south Asia and Africa. People loosely described as 'foreigners' or 'immigrants' were widely perceived as both symptom and cause of Stoke-on-Trent's current malaise: evidence of the decline of 'community' in previously homogenous working class neighbourhoods and responsible for much of the crime, disorder and drug abuse that affected the quality of 'Potteries people's' lives.

Although almost all participants made exceptions for particular individuals or groups, our discussions generally proceeded on the basis of a more or less straightforward distinction between 'us' - people who belong in Britain, England, North Staffordshire and/or 'our' community - and 'them' - people who do not. Precisely who 'we' and 'they'

were varied from person to person and from group to group. Some felt strongly attached to particular neighbourhoods, others to Stoke or (North) Staffordshire. When it came to a sense of national identity, more people saw themselves as 'English' rather than 'British', sometimes because the greater exclusivity of 'Englishness' could be used in sharpening the distinction between a native 'us' and an immigrant 'them'. A few dissenters among the older groups either claimed a 'European' identity or refused to be 'labelled' at all. The marks of belonging, of being one of 'us', also varied widely. Birthplace and ancestry were important for some; character, culture and a commitment to certain standards of 'respectable' behaviour for others. For some of the older participants, their identity was bound up with that of their city, and the ceramics for which it had been so justly famous.

Who 'they' were, and what made 'them' different, had little to do with participants' very imperfect knowledge of the law on immigration, asylum, and nationality. Birthplace, length of residence and skin colour were much less significant in people's judgements than ethnicity, 'attitude', and behaviour. 'Scousers', Londoners, 'gypsies' and 'riff raff' from other parts of Stoke could find themselves condemned along with 'foreigners' and 'immigrants', while 'niggers', 'half castes' and 'Chinks' (despite the casually offensive language used to describe them) were accepted as fundamentally 'safe' and 'sound': hard-working, respectful, and appreciative of what Britain had to offer. For many younger people, 'they', those who did not belong 'here', who had a 'bad attitude' and did not behave appropriately, were simply 'Pakis'. There was no necessary connection between 'Pakis' and Pakistan: people of Indian, Iraqi and Afghan origin could be 'Pakis' too. Only 'Kosovans' formed a distinct, but equally distrusted, alien group.

Immigration and asylum: who deserves what?

Asked for their views about the way in which immigration and asylum were being dealt with by the government, focus group participants rarely paused to distinguish between asylum seekers, refugees, and other newcomers to Britain. People in the younger groups competed with each other to suggest the most lethal solution to immigration. Some fantasised about killing would-be migrants themselves. On reflection, many of them expressed similar views to their elders: the government should come clean about the scale of 'the problem' (no-one doubted that immigration was a problem, and everyone thought that politicians were not doing enough to tackle it); claims of persecution should be more thoroughly investigated; many more migrants should be 'sent back' to where they came from; and access to benefits, housing and healthcare should be restricted to dispel the 'soft touch' image that attracts people to Britain in the first place. The crucial question for most participants was one of 'who deserves what?' 'Genuine' asylum seekers fleeing persecution, well-qualified English-speaking professionals with valuable skills, people prepared to live by 'our' rules, speak 'our' language and work hard to make new lives for themselves all deserved to be allowed into Britain; illegal entrants, 'scroungers', terrorists, disease carriers, people who refuse to 'integrate', and 'bogus' asylum seekers did not.

Victimisation, entitlement and disrespect

Participants' attitudes towards North Staffordshire as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural 'community' were informed by (often limited) personal experiences of interacting with people from different backgrounds and from accounts gleaned from family, friends and the media. Several young people gave first-hand accounts of adversarial, sometimes violent, encounters. Though the stories that emerged were rarely unambiguous, the tellers were inclined to see themselves as the innocent victims of abusive, threatening or aggressive behaviour by others routinely identified as 'Pakis' or 'Asians'. Two older participants talked in similar terms about incidents in which members of their immediate families had been involved in violent confrontations with people they initially identified as 'Pakis'. Common to all of these stories was the feeling that the police and the criminal justice system were biased against 'us' white people, indifferent to 'our' victimisation and obsessed with uncovering and punishing 'our' racism.

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The health service, the benefits system and local agencies responsible for providing social housing had also been coerced into favouring 'them' as the only means of avoiding accusations of racism. While pensioners, ex-servicemen and hard-working mothers providing for their children on meagre salaries struggled to survive, lazy, good-for-nothing 'Asians' and 'asylum seekers' were given new homes and money for cars, driving lessons, designer clothes and mobile phones. To some extent at least, all our discussions were pervaded by participants' sense of injustice, of being the helpless victims of policies crafted by a distant, liberal, 'politically correct' elite and administered by public servants in thrall to vociferous minority interests and terrified of being accused of racism.

Connected to this was the equally common feeling that 'they' - migrants and ethnic minorities - lacked respect for 'us', 'our' country, 'our' rules and 'our' way of life. In part this was simply a matter of numbers: Britain and Stoke-on-Trent were being 'overrun', 'saturated', 'swamped' by the combined effects of mass immigration and unrestrained reproduction. Apart from being a constant, insubordinate and intimidating presence on the streets, a terrorist minority of 'them' presented a much more profound threat to the nation's security personified, for some, in the menacing media presence of Abu Hamza and reflected in the paranoid fantasy of a 'Paki' suicide bomber attacking the Potteries Shopping Centre. Instead of integrating and adapting to 'our' way of life, 'theirs' was being forced on 'us': 'our' children were 'taught Muslim in school'; 'they' thought they could treat women, including 'white girls', as 'second class citizens'; 'they' chose not to adhere to 'our' standards of public hygiene; 'they' maintained 'their' own impenetrable cultural traditions, and could speak in their own incomprehensible languages, while 'our' culture and 'our' language was there for everyone to understand but none to celebrate. Most humiliating of all perhaps was the feeling that some of 'them' were, or could rapidly become, better-educated, wealthier and more respected than most of 'us'.

Many of these responses to the presence of people with different cultural traditions were evident in participants' reactions to the raising of the Union Jack on a flagpole in Cobridge Park in 2001 and a more recent controversy surrounding the visibility of religious symbols at a local crematorium. When we asked participants for their views on a newspaper story about 'asylum seekers' being recruited to work as doctors in the NHS everyone agreed that steps should be taken to ensure that recruits were properly qualified and could speak good English. With these provisos, the majority of participants were happy to see 'deserving' individuals with scarce professional skills helping to resolve a crisis of resources in the NHS caused, at least in some eyes, by the need to treat other 'undeserving' migrants. Some of the younger women were concerned that male doctors might pose a sexual threat, while two male teenagers speculated wildly about the possibility of a racist 'Paki doctor' deliberately failing to diagnose fatal illnesses in white patients. Others assumed that, because an individual doctor had a poor command of English, or did not conform to what participants thought were the highest standards of clinical practice, this was automatically true of all minority ethnic practitioners. A final cause for concern - again among the younger participants - was that, by working or being trained as doctors, asylum seekers would gain an unfair advantage over people like 'us'.

The BNP and the politics of 'race' and 'racism'

Reactions to the British National Party (BNP), both spontaneous and prompted by the researchers, ranged from outright condemnation to enthusiastic expressions of support. Six people at both ends of the age distribution said that they had either voted BNP in the past or would do so in the future; a seventh was a local party activist. Another 14 participants, including one young man who seemed keener on the National Front, expressed varying degrees of sympathy for what they understood the BNP's policies to be on key issues such as immigration, asylum, 'race' and the benefits system. Two young women were wary of the BNP because of what their parents had told them about the organisation's reputation for violence. Rather surprisingly, given the party's high profile in Stoke-on-Trent, two other participants - a teenage girl and a woman in her fifties - claimed never to have heard of the BNP.

Asked to account for its popularity in the city, participants saw support for the BNP as reflecting something more than a defiant act of protest against the local dominance of Labour and a more fundamental disillusionment with politics and politicians. Thus the BNP was seen as benefiting from the city's economic decline, the Party's commitment to reforming the welfare system along Thatcherite lines and the hard work put in on behalf of local people by other councillors independent of the major political parties. However, there was little doubt in most participants' minds that the main appeal of the BNP lay in its opposition to immigration, asylum and multiculturalism; its sturdy defence of British culture; its 'honesty' in saying out loud what so many people - cowed by 'political correctness' and fearful of being condemned as bigots - really believed about 'race', 'racism' and the discrimination faced by white Britons in their own country. According to the binary logic of racial politics, a vote for the BNP was most clearly intelligible as a vote for 'us', and against 'them'.

Reading racist violence: 'Brothers jailed for race attacks'

Participants' views on racially motivated violence were canvassed by asking them to react to a story in the local newspaper about three white brothers who had been sent to prison for attacking a 'black student' and a '50 year-old Turkish man' after a night out in Newcastle. Insofar as the story could be taken at face value, the majority of participants thought that the three brothers - two of whom had been sentenced to four years, the other to 18 months - had got no more than they deserved. Indeed, some older participants thought that the brothers had got off far too lightly and saw the sentences as further evidence of the malign influence of politically correct 'do-gooders' on the criminal justice system.

Apart from condemning the attacks as reported, participants also sought to reinterpret them either as having been provoked in some way or as having little or nothing to do with 'race'. The most streetwise group of young people thought that the victims must have said or done something to provoke the violence - even a look from the Turkish man would have sufficed if, as they suspected, the brothers had been drinking. They and others also wondered whether the brothers might have objected to the student having a white girlfriend. For many older people the incidents were unexceptional, the kind of thing that happened most nights in the centre of Newcastle, and further evidence of the worrying effects of alcoholic excess and the impulsivity of youth rather than any deep-seated racial antagonism. That the brothers had been convicted and punished at all, and the story reported so prominently in the local newspaper, was interpreted as yet another example of institutionalised bias against white people on the part of the criminal justice system and the media.

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Conclusion

Why do they do it? To answer this question it is essential, firstly, to pay careful attention to individual biographies and, secondly, to read perpetrators' life stories, and the behaviours that led to them being identified as 'perpetrators', in the context of a broad understanding of the communities in which racist incidents occur. We begin with the relatively straightforward, but nonetheless unsettling, idea that the attitudes of our sample of perpetrators were very similar to those of our focus group participants. Thinking and talking in terms of 'us' and 'them', of people who belong and people who do not, was something that perpetrators shared with 'ordinary' people of all ages from across North Staffordshire. As we have shown, older focus group participants shared an obvious sense of loss; industries, jobs, communities, a whole way of life had gone, never to return. Though they had never known the good times (real or imagined), younger people were living with the consequences of deindustrialisation. Almost everyone - old, young or middle-aged, men and women - felt that the present was unsettling and the future uncertain. Few of them would have been happy to be described as 'racists' - on the contrary, many saw themselves as victims of discrimination - yet almost all of them associated immigration and the descendants of immigrants with everything that was wrong with their lives - from crime to unemployment, inadequate healthcare to sub-standard housing. The presence of still relatively small but increasing, and increasingly diverse, migrant and minority ethnic populations was seen as both an emblem of the Stoke-on-Trent's decline, and an uncomfortable reminder of their own inability to 'have a nice home and a nice life'.

Most, but not all, of our sample of perpetrators had very similar views. But this is not to say that all of those with such views were hardened race-haters committed to attacking or harassing people from other ethnic groups. The overwhelming majority were not. What their life stories did reveal were patterns of severe, occasionally extreme, material and emotional deprivation combined with, or compounded by, histories of other kinds of offending behaviour, criminalisation, domestic violence, mental illness, and the abuse of drugs and alcohol. Although they could be, in certain circumstances and towards certain groups of people, dangerous and intimidating, the typically young, poor, emotionally damaged and socially marginal sub-group of perpetrators who had actually been convicted of one or more racially aggravated offences were not an extraordinary group of offenders. Including three young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, they were, rather, a familiar cross-section of those routinely arrested by the police and sentenced before the courts. Living in communities where so many of 'our' misfortunes are blamed on a few of 'them', and where 'their' perceived lack of respect for 'us' is matched by the indifference (or worse) of national and local political elites, it is hardly surprising that some of North Staffordshire's most severely disadvantaged and vulnerable residents feel justified - in some cases compelled - to project their feelings of shame, envy, and disgust on to minority groups. The currency that anti-immigrant sentiment has gained as a result of populist electioneering, both locally and nationally, has probably made it more, rather than less, socially acceptable for those struggling with volatile emotions to project them, often aggressively, sometimes violently, onto migrant and minority ethnic groups.

Centre for Criminological Research

Keele University

June 2005

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Further Information

This document can be downloaded from the following website:

http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/cr/Gadd/current_research.htm

A full report of the findings of this research project will be available on the internet from September 2005.

For further information please feel free to contact either **David Gadd (email: d.r.gadd@keele.ac.uk)** or **Bill Dixon (email: w.j.dixon@keele.ac.uk)** at: The Centre for Criminological Research, Keele University, Staffs, ST5 5BG.

