

RESEARCH FINDINGS No. 59

ETHNICITY AND CONTACTS WITH THE POLICE: LATEST FINDINGS FROM THE BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

Tom Bucke

The British Crime Survey (BCS) asks people about crimes they have experienced in the last year. It also asks about their contacts with the police. The BCS regularly puts these questions to extra samples of Asians and Afro-Caribbeans to provide more reliable numbers. This report examines levels of contact with the police across ethnic groups. It concentrates on results from the 1994 and 1996 surveys. Both surveys asked about levels of police contact. The 1994 BCS also asked in more detail about people's most recent police contact.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ White people were generally more likely than ethnic minorities to have contacted the police during the previous year.
- ▶ Reporting a crime was the most common reason for contacting the police for all groups, (Afro-Caribbeans: 19%; Asians: 20%; whites: 18%).
- ▶ Views of the police response to crime reports were generally positive, with whites more satisfied (75%) than Afro-Caribbeans and Asians (both 61%).
- ▶ Afro-Caribbeans were more likely to be stopped by the police while on foot or in a car during the previous year – 23% in comparison with 15% of Asians and 16% of whites. They were also more likely to experience multiple stops.
- ▶ Afro-Caribbeans were more than twice as likely as whites to be searched when stopped and four times more likely to be arrested.
- ▶ A majority of those stopped said they were satisfied with how officers managed the stop. The demeanour of officers was an important factor in how people rated the encounter.
- ▶ A majority of each ethnic group felt the police in their area did a 'good job'. However, public confidence varied across ethnic groups.

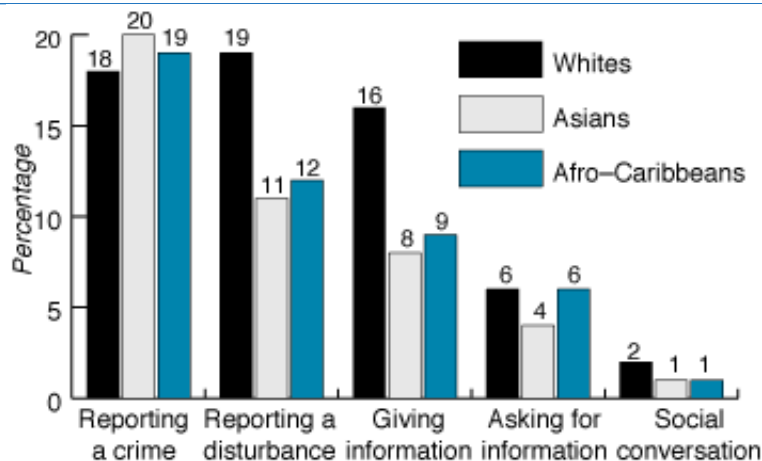
PUBLIC-INITIATED CONTACTS

The 1996 BCS found significant proportions of all ethnic groups had contacted the police at least once during the previous year. More white people did so than other groups: whites – 43%; Afro-Caribbeans – 38%; Asians – 33%. Reasons for such contact fell into five main categories (see Figure 1). For all groups, the most common reason was to report a crime committed against themselves, a family member, or people they knew well (such as neighbours). Both Asians and Afro-Caribbeans were slightly more likely than whites to have made a crime report. Whites, however, were more likely than ethnic minorities to have reported a disturbance,

suspicious circumstance or nuisance, and provided information (such as a report of a traffic accident, medical emergency or missing person). Slightly more whites and Afro-Caribbeans compared with Asians had approached the police to ask for information (such as directions).

Public-initiated contact for all three ethnic groups had fallen slightly compared with the 1994 BCS. For example, contact by Afro-Caribbeans had declined from 42% to 38%. This was due to a drop in contact across most of the categories, but especially in reporting crime.

Figure 1 Reasons given for contacting police (1996 BCS)



EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING CRIME

The 1994 BCS asked respondents reporting a crime to recall their most recent contact with the police and describe what happened. Those asked included victims of crime and people reporting a crime on behalf of someone else. In the majority of cases crime reports led to face-to-face contact with the police, which usually took place at the respondent’s home or the crime scene. Assessments of the police response to crime reports were generally positive. However, compared with whites, Asians and Afro-Caribbeans were less satisfied that officers:

- responded immediately to their initial contact
- were sufficiently interested in what they said
- put enough effort into dealing with the matter.

Among whites, only 48% felt they had been kept very or fairly well informed. The figure was lower for Asians (34%) and Afro-Caribbeans (33%). Not being kept well informed is a persistent complaint made by crime victims in all sweeps of the BCS (e.g. Skogan, 1994).

The vast majority of all groups viewed the behaviour of officers as being courteous, with very small proportions considering the police impolite (whites: 4%; Asians: 6%; Afro-Caribbeans: 4%). When giving an assessment of how the police performed overall, a majority of all groups said they were satisfied (see Figure 2). However, levels of satisfaction were lower among ethnic minorities, with 61% of both Asians and Afro-Caribbeans either ‘very’ or ‘fairly satisfied’ compared with 75% of whites. Those contacting the police via a 999 call were most satisfied, but again approval ratings were notably lower among ethnic minorities.

Three quarters of whites and Afro-Caribbeans and two thirds of Asians stated that their experience of reporting crime had made no difference to their view of the police. Of those who changed their minds, whites felt more favourably disposed towards the police, while Asians and Afro-Caribbeans felt slightly less so.

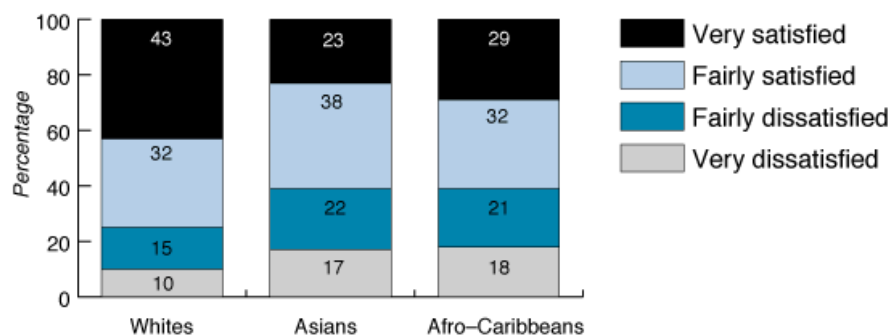
Differences in the assessments made by each ethnic group may reflect various factors, including the kind of crime being reported and the seriousness with which it was regarded. Afro-Caribbeans and Asians were more likely than whites to be reporting an offence against the person, such as assault or robbery. Those reporting a crime were asked to rate how serious they thought it was, using a scale of 0 to 20. Afro-Caribbeans and Asians gave a higher average rating of seriousness (9.6 and 9.3 respectively) compared with whites (7.0).

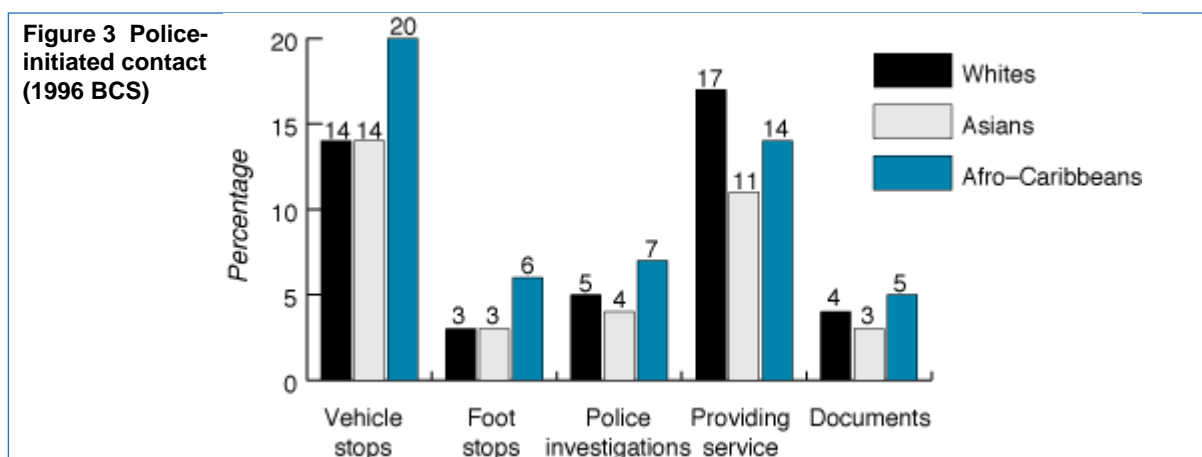
Past contacts with officers are also likely to influence the way people judge the police response. A previous analysis of BCS results suggested that those stopped by the police were more likely to express dissatisfaction if they subsequently had occasion to contact them as a victim (Maxfield, 1988).

POLICE-INITIATED CONTACT

There are also ethnic differences in encounters initiated by the police. According to the 1996 BCS more Afro-Caribbeans (37%) had been approached by the police during the previous year than whites (33%) and Asians (26%). Figure 3 divides police-initiated encounters into five main categories. Afro-Caribbeans, compared with other ethnic groups, were more likely to be:

Figure 2 Reporting crime: satisfaction with police response (1994 BCS)





- stopped while in a vehicle or on foot
- investigated (e.g. questioned about an offence, have house searched, be arrested)
- asked for documents or statement.

Whites were more likely to be contacted by officers providing a service (e.g. returning lost property and dealing with ringing burglar alarms). Comparison with previous sweeps of the BCS reveal little overall change in the level of police-initiated encounters.

Taking vehicle and foot stops together, just under a quarter (23%) of Afro-Caribbeans recalled being stopped during the previous year, compared with 15% of Asians and 16% of whites. Afro-Caribbeans also had a greater chance of being stopped more than once (14%), than Asians (7%) and whites (5%).

Table 1 shows that stops varied according to age and sex. Within each ethnic group males were much more likely to be stopped than females, as were those aged between 16 and 25 compared with older people. When divided by age and sex, the level of stops experienced by young male Afro-Caribbeans and whites are closer than the overall figures for men. However, differences exist between these groups and young Asian males who are stopped at a lower level.

EXPERIENCES OF POLICE STOPS

The 1994 BCS asked respondents about their most recent police stop. Two-thirds of stops experienced by each group occurred outside their own neighbourhood. Just under half of those stopped thought that this was

because they were suspected of committing an offence (whites: 49%; Asians: 47%; Afro-Caribbeans: 43%). A majority said the police gave an adequate explanation for the stop – although Afro-Caribbeans were notably less convinced than others.

Once stopped, Afro-Caribbeans were more likely to be searched (20%) than Asians (15%) or whites (8%) and more likely to be arrested (12%) than Asians (6%) and whites (3%).

The majority of all groups were satisfied with how officers had managed the stop (whites: 82%; Asians: 72%; Afro-Caribbeans: 55%). This may reflect the non-adversarial nature of many police stops – those searched were more likely to be dissatisfied. Police demeanour was an important factor. People were more content when officers were perceived as polite, fair and attentive. Previous analysis of the BCS (Skogan, 1990) also underlined the impact of police behaviour, suggesting that it can be more influential in determining satisfaction than the final outcome of the encounter.

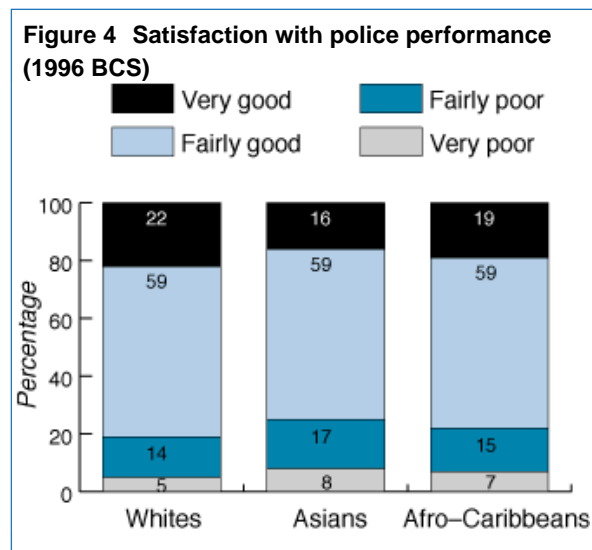
Respondents were asked if the stop had changed their view of the police at all. The majority said it had made no difference (Afro-Caribbeans: 80%; Asians: 78%; whites: 72%). Of those reporting a change, whites were slightly more favourable, while Asians, and especially Afro-Caribbeans tended to become more negative.

ASSESSMENT OF LOCAL POLICE

The BCS has traditionally provided a picture of public confidence in the police by asking respondents to

Table 1 Percentage of police stops by ethnicity, sex and age (1996 BCS)

Age	Whites			Asians			Afro-Caribbeans		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
16-25 years	47	26	36	36	9	22	53	28	40
26 and over	17	9	13	16	8	12	29	12	19
All ages	21	11	16	21	8	15	33	14	23



assess the police's performance in their area. Bearing in mind the different experiences of each ethnic group, these assessments were remarkably similar (see Figure 4). A majority of each group in the 1996 BCS felt the police did a 'very' or 'fairly good' job.

However, these overall figures tend to hide variations within groups – the most prominent of these concerning age. Table 2 presents figures for those giving the police a 'very good' rating by age. Within

Table 2 Percentages of those giving a 'very good' rating for police performance (1996 BCS)

Age	Whites	Asians	Afro-Caribbeans
16-25 years	12	7	15
26 and over	24	21	20
All ages	22	16	19

each ethnic group fewer people aged 16 to 25 years gave this rating compared with those 26 and over. This was particularly noticeable for Asians and whites.

Previous sweeps of the BCS have suggested a decline in public confidence (see Bucke, 1995). A comparison of 'very good' ratings from 1982 and 1996 shows confidence to have declined for each ethnic group. The most dramatic fall is for white respondents whose 'very good' rating halved from 44% to 22%. This was followed by Asians (from 36% to 16%) and Afro-Caribbeans (from 27% to 19%). However, the main change has been for people to qualify their approval of police performance from 'very good' to 'fairly good'. This decline in confidence appears to have slowed in the 1990s (see Mirrlees-Black and Budd, 1997).

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The 1996 BCS put questions on the police to 7,429 whites, 1,265 Afro-Caribbeans and 1,191 Asians. Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) conducted the interviews which took place between January and April 1996. The sample was drawn from the Postcode Address File – a listing of all postal delivery points. The survey's response rate was 83%. The 1994 BCS included similar numbers and had a response rate of 77%.

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