CERS

Centre for Ethnicity & Racism Studies

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Research Findings

November 2007

Racist Hostility and Racist Victimisation

This study arose from a set of local agency concerns about increasing racist hostility and violence in an area of low-income social housing in Leeds, together with a strong sense that what is needed is firstly, a better understanding of how racist hostility works and, secondly, more effective action to respond to this highly durable problem. Fieldwork with victims, residents and agency staff to examine these issues was carried out by Ian Law, Lou Hemmerman, Ala Sirriyeh and Jenny Simms from the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies at the University of Leeds from January to June 2007.

- Racist hostility and violence in Leeds has proved to be highly durable despite increased levels of reporting and improvements in policies and practices of relevant agencies.

- Dealing with individuals, by either supporting victims of racist violence or taking action against perpetrators has left community-wide patterns of racist hostility largely untouched.

- Victims of racist violence identified widespread hostility in the area combining overt aggressive racism particularly from children and young people, more covert everyday racist talk from older people and intimidatory extreme right activity, as well as some positive interaction with local people.

- The drivers of racist hostility include white resentment of black and minority ethnic families' ability to access social housing, jealousy of lifestyle and possessions, and perceptions of unfair preferential treatment. Strong local family/community networks enforce hostility, hound families out and maintain an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Poverty, abandonment and disempowerment and associate shame, rage and anger were often channeled into racist hostility and violence.

- Asian groups were the most unwelcome and hated in this area and Black African families were highly visible key targets of racist hostility.

- Victims identified the failure of agencies to respond effectively given the scale of widespread racist hostility and the weakness of enforcement processes.

- Poor levels of service to victims and poorly implemented race hate policy together with a strong desire for more effective work with local communities were stressed by local agencies.

Racist violence in Leeds

Leeds City Council first adopted a Racial Harassment Policy in 1986. Evidence from the early years of that policy showed a sporadic pattern of racist violence, being reported across most inner and outer estates and areas, which did not lend itself to easy explanation in terms of competition, territorialism, newness of household movements or activities of extreme right groups. Twenty years later, current levels of reported incidents of race hate in Leeds at between 4,000 to 5,000 across the city continue to indicate the durability, geographical spread and significance of such violence. Reported incidents have hugely increased during this period which confirms significant improvements in public reporting, staff awareness and agency recording practices. However, reported incidents are acknowledged to be a fraction of the total number, with real levels of race hate incidents likely to be upwards of 10,000 per year. Factors which strengthen the bonds between families, including changing economic opportunities and isolation from social networks outside the local area, can strengthen mobilisation to respond to external threats and dangers. Strong communities may often be highly exclusionary. A key to understanding how this process works is to examine local norms, values and sanctions to conform operating across a range of networks including families, friends/peer groups and other informal forms of association. This study examines perceptions of victims and residents in one local area of Leeds.

Victims' experiences

Evidence from victims identifies the immediate and escalating levels of racist violence they experienced. It identifies a variety of strategies employed in response including avoidance and changes to daily routines, negotiation, trying to keep neighbours onside and late reporting of cases. The impact on families included deterioration in physical and mental health, markedly so for children. Significant difficulties were experienced in obtaining re-housing following racist harassment. Victims felt there to be widespread hostility in this area combining overt aggressive racism particularly from children and young people with more covert everyday racist talk from older people. There was also some recognition of positive interaction with neighbours and other residents. They identified a serious lack of awareness and exposure to cultural diversity/mix in the local community. They were also intimidated due to BNP activities in the area. Victims expressed some positive comments about the support from individuals from agencies including Housing, Police, Victim Support and Leeds Racial Harassment Project, but were critical of the ability of agencies to respond effectively given the scale of widespread racist hostility and the weakness of enforcement processes. There is room for significant improvement in many aspects of work with victim's including information and advice, casework support, victim support, re-housing, enforcement and prevention.

Understanding racist hostility

The drivers of racist hostility include white resentment of black and minority ethnic families' ability to access social housing, jealousy of lifestyle and possessions, and perceptions of unfair preferential treatment. Competition-based racist hostility in relation to housing and low paid work was strongly voiced. This is compounded by everyday racist talk/gossip/hearsay and related misinformation, and denial of racist intent. One centrally important contextual factor is community self-policing: power and mobilisation of local family/community networks to enforce hostility, hound families out, maintain an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, and instrumental promotion of racist hostility where it is seen to be useful to achieve family/community/criminal goals. Several tensions in the area are linked to very narrow and specific social and geographic boundaries of trust and safety. Racisms on this estate are linked to fear of the 'other' and fierce allegiance to those who are close to oneself, often for protection. Poverty, abandonment and disempowerment were often articulated through racist hostility. Mistrust of authority and feelings of disengagement can lead to community self regulation practices that are exclusionary and defensive. Narratives of neglect and lack of care were strongly expressed together with some strong sense of community pride and affection for the area. Hostility to public agencies, and an embattled sense of political and social abandonment and isolation with local values of 'toughing it out' and 'looking after your own' are frequently upheld. So, for many households in these areas racist hostility meets a test of practical adequacy, it makes sense and fits with core norms and values.

Racism in this locality takes a number of forms, is expressed in a variety of ways and also intersects with a multiplicity of other bitter resentments and emotions that are to do with class, poverty and gendered identity. It is often hard for both residents and researchers to separate issues of racism out from other common practices of resentment, exclusion and suspicion within estate life. People on the estate are not always explicitly racist in terms of skin colour but draw upon spectrums of belonging and entitlement that factor in class, family affiliation, heritage and level of contribution to estate life. Race difference was often used as a channel for rage, anger and disaffection, as an expressive tool but not always the motivation. This helps to account for the high level of denial, distancing and justification expressed in relation to racism. Some of the more severe racist incidents on the estate were precipitated or triggered by noise nuisance, alcohol, adjunctive traffic incidents/accidents and unsociable hours. A range of different forms of racism were identified. There was a strong impression given that Asian groups were the most unwelcome and hated in this area and we heard accounts of how Asian families had been hounded off the estate before they could even get their possessions out of the removal van. Black African families were highly visible key targets of racist hostility. During the research a Sudanese family had received threatening letters, Nigerian families had experienced a battery of harassment and abuse and a Zimbabwean family had golf balls routinely aimed at their windows and their car set alight. Catch-all terms such as 'Kosovan' and asylum-seeker were also used in labelling households as problematic and for targeting hostilities. There were wider levels of harassment aimed at people with Southern accents, working lifestyles and Eastern Europeans. The racism experienced by mixed race families and their hostile views about other groups are also identified. Lastly, the significant role of the BNP is examined showing how their message of representation of the excluded working classes ties in with local understandings and denials of racism, while undeniably racialising pre-existing resentments.

Racist values are being passed on across generations, both within families on the estate and through other informal contact between children, young people and adults. Large groups of young people congregating in one area were often labelled as gangs and subsequently many accounts of racist hostility were linked to their presence. But,

interventions aimed primarily at young people are not adequate due to the role of parents and other adults in inciting racist behaviour and the wider community being complicit in its inaction and protection of perpetrators.

Agency responses

The need for an improvement in agency responses was recognised by many representatives from these agencies. Poor levels of service, poorly implemented policy, poor perceptions of service and a strong desire for more effective work with local communities were powerfully stressed:

"The level and adequacy of support for victims and families suffering from racist victimisation is 'appalling' and services are 'very fragmented'." (Customer Services Manager)

"How do you deal with a community who feel that they have so much anger that they have to attack somebody?....What is lacking is engagement with communities..getting them to change, support and befriend people" (Hate Crime Officer)

Our report strongly supports the general thrust of these views and seeks to show how greater understanding of both the impact of racist harassment on victims and the complex ways in which racist hostility works in local communities requires a re-thinking and a renewal of policy and practice in this field. In reviewing the Strategic Vision for Tackling Hate Incidents in the local area it is clear that further action is needed in the following areas:

- Need to develop systematic programme of community engagement and community work around racism reduction
- Need to improve reporting and enforcement
- Need to improve level and adequacy of support for victims and their families
- Need to improve information and advice on racist risks when bidding for housing
- Need to improve enforcement action against perpetrators
- Need to improve information and feedback for victims, explanations as to why certain evidence is not being used as many are being very pro-active in collecting this, and keeping victims up to date on their cases even when they have moved outside the area.

- Victim support has been minimal for this group. No counselling/therapy etc for children at all seems to have been offered. Some children are severely affected by the racist nature of these experiences, and parents are very much on their own here as well as dealing with the affects the harassment has had on themselves
- Programmes that emanate from, and are embedded in, the community, enabling local community members to take the lead and develop common interests at the grassroots may be more successful.
- While perpetrators of racist harassment have been identified as predominantly young people, a focus on positive activities for young people may only touch the most visible part of the problem. As this report has identified, all victims of harassment noted the involvement of parents and families in inciting racist behaviour and the wider community being complicit in its inaction and protection of perpetrators.
- It may be helpful to focus even more locally on small-scale activities around the streets where harassment has been at its height.
- Tackling prominent myths about unfair resource allocation, particularly housing allocation and repairs and the constant drip feed of negative stories
- Building community based support and understanding for fairness in service provision
- Tackling poverty and long term unemployment and associated resentment of others
- Tackling local practices and cultures of criminality, intimidation, violence and reputation, the influence of several powerful local families and the normality of using violent methods in conflicts
- Reducing fear of crime and violence and improving sense of safety and security
- Improving positive and inclusive perceptions of belonging, family and community
- Tackling local feelings of abandonment, disempowerment, mistrust of authority and feelings of disengagement, engaging with local narratives of neglect and lack of care and building on the sense of community pride and affection for the area ie. serious and sustained community development work and building capacity of existing local groups
- Tackling denial, distancing and justifications for racist violence and hostility
- Reducing likelihood of 'trigger factors' including noise nuisance, alcohol, traffic incidents/accidents, BBQs etc, leading to violent conformtations.
- Addressing wide variety of forms that racism and related hostility takes

- Tackling the influence of the extreme right
- Improving parenting skills
- Supporting and extending 'racism reduction' and aspirational initiatives with children and young people

About the study

The fieldwork team used a combination of qualitative data collection techniques to document and explore the experiences and views of residents, victims of racial harassment and key informants during January to June 2007 in an area of social housing in Leeds. 103 interviews were completed comprising key informants (27), victims of racist violence (11) and estate residents (65) together with additional data collection by the fieldwork team. The full report *Situating Racist Hostility and Understanding the Impact of Racist Victimisation in Leeds* by Lou Hemmerman, Ian Law, Jenny Simms, and Ala Sirriyeh (2007) is available at www.leeds.ac.uk/cers. This study was funded by Leeds South East Homes.

The parallel report, *The Racism Reduction Agenda: building the framework, signposting good practice and learning the lessons by Ian Law* (2007) identifies good practice and the need for action in developing community-based campaigning and preventative initiatives, improving reporting, intelligence gathering and surveillance, pursuing crime and conflict initiatives, improving agency practice, improving cross-sector learning/working, improving work with perpetrators and offenders and developing performance standards.

For further information on this study contact:
Ian Law, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT.
E-mail: i.g.law@leeds.ac.uk; Tel: 0113-343-4410