

EXPERIENCES OF MINORITY ETHNIC EMPLOYEES IN PRISONS



A briefing on a PRT survey of the views of black and minority ethnic prison staff



KEY FINDINGS

- Covert and structural racism were more widespread causes of concern than blatant racist discrimination.
- Two-thirds of those surveyed felt that race relations were valued in their place of work and nearly half believed that race relations have been improving in the Prison Service.
- 61 per cent said that they had experienced direct racial discrimination while employed in prisons.
- Black and minority ethnic (BME) prison staff were more likely to have experienced direct racial discrimination from their colleagues than from prisoners or managers.
- In addition to direct personal experience, the BME staff surveyed saw persistent organisational and structural problems. Two-thirds felt that institutional racism was a problem in their workplace, with 15 per cent feeling that the problem was severe.
- Over half of those who experienced racism chose not to report it.
- BME prison staff tended to turn to their colleagues for support following an experience of racism. About half of those who had experienced racism said they had received no support from RESPECT, the BME prison staff support network, from their trade unions or from managers, but only 17 per cent said they had received no support from colleagues.

Background

Fair and equitable working conditions for black and minority ethnic staff are fundamental to building healthy race relations in prisons. In 2003, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and HM Prison Service jointly established an action plan on race relations. The aim was to follow up a CRE investigation into race relations and to ensure compliance with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which placed public agencies (including prisons) under the obligation to promote race equality. People from BME groups make up about nine per cent of the general population, 25 per cent of the prison population, and less than six per cent of those employed in prisons.

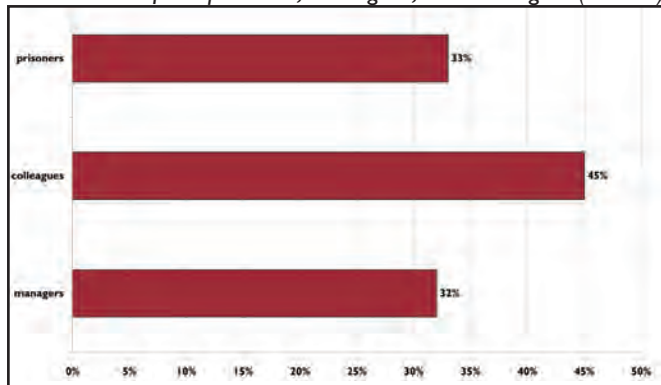
RESPECT, the Prison Service minority ethnic staff support network was launched in 2000. Full membership is open to anyone from a minority ethnic group who works for the Prison Service, and includes BME prison staff from the private sector. In 2004-5, PRT, with the support of the Barrow Cadbury Trust, conducted a survey of members of RESPECT. We received 117 responses from BME prison staff, and interviewed 29 of them, mostly in their place of work. This briefing presents a rare insight into the experience of BME prison staff and their views about race relations and racism in prisons.

It follows the publication of the report of the inquiry into the death of Zahid Mubarek, chaired by Mr Justice Keith. The inquiry found that the perceptions that BME and non-BME prison staff had of race relations were profoundly different and that the culture allowed race relations to be treated as separate from the basic operational duties of prison work. The Mubarek report recommended that each prison be required to develop its own race equality scheme. It also called on the Prison Service to explore the possibility of using outside, independent bodies to investigate complaints of racism and raised the urgent need to improve diversity training for officers.

Experience of racism in working in prisons

Almost two-thirds of staff surveyed (61 per cent) stated that they had experienced direct racial discrimination while working in prison, in the forms of isolation, harassment, verbal abuse and a lack of equal opportunities. As *Table One* shows, BME staff said that they were most likely to experience racism from their colleagues, rather than from managers or prisoners.

Table One: Proportion of BME staff who experienced racial discrimination from prisoners, colleagues, and managers (n=114)



The people interviewed by PRT perceived that blatant, malicious racism was becoming less common, and that covert racism and structural forms were now a more serious concern. This suggests that institutional racism persists in prison culture, through attitudes and ignorance of cultural differences. BME staff commented on both forms in the interviews:

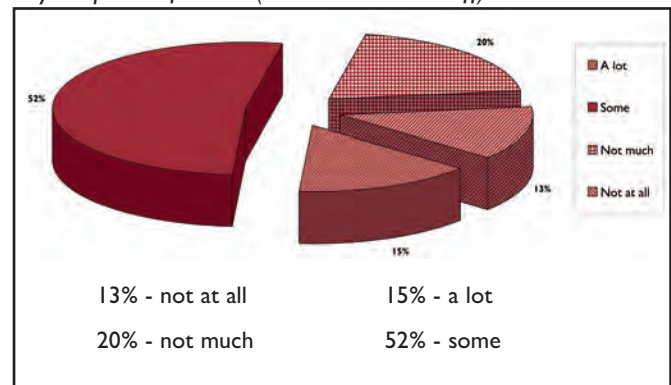
It is subtle, not very obvious, now. Most people are careful because of fear of being sacked. But you can see it in people's attitudes – the way they relate to you.

One of my colleagues constantly refers to black and Asian people in a negative manner but very subtly. This has continued for three years.

Although the general climate in the group is good, the evidence when you look around amongst over 160 staff that only one is a senior manager (recently recruited), those on temporary promotion are white, and very little offers of advanced jobs for people of colour. We are always the last to be considered, if at all.

The PRT survey revealed that two-thirds of BME prison staff felt that institutional racism was a problem in their place of work.

Table Two: To what extent is institutional racism a problem in your place of work? (N = 108 BME staff)



Many BME prison staff perceive systemic racism in personnel management, especially in career development, and in the grievance procedures.

Making complaints about racism

PRT found that there was a widespread lack of confidence among BME staff in the official procedures for handling complaints about racism. Comments on the survey suggested that the present system sometimes left bitter feelings:

It would have been pointless complaining to the very people who had been discriminating against me.

- 1) I was not believed*
- 2) Managers attempted to persuade me not to make it official*
- 3) Managers sided with the perpetrators*
- 4) It took too long to reach a verdict*
- 5) They 'lost' the paperwork, the complaint file*
- 6) The CRE wanted me to provide proof.*

Many BME prison employees provided reasons why they do not trust the system. For example, staff may be reluctant to report racism when they feel isolated, particularly in prisons where there are few BME staff:

I felt no-one in the prison felt what I was going through. The only people who might were the prisoners. White officers shout racist language. You go home and have to live with this, it's very difficult.

It's difficult where the establishment has small numbers of BME staff. It makes you not want to say anything. I guess that is why things carry on.

Until we are able to eradicate the fear involved when reporting incidents (i.e., fear of being ostracised) we will always have a problem.

Another reason for a lack of confidence is that the official investigation process tends to deny the victim a choice about how the situation would be handled:

I understood that the comment was racist; the person who made it apologised immediately and reported it himself. I was not happy with the management's response in wanting to sack the officer. I believe that we had both been arguing and the incident had been resolved.

But another explanation is the increase in covert forms of racism: these are far more difficult to prove, especially if you are one individual against a prison. If investigations begin with a cynical stance towards the staff members' perceptions, it is not surprising that BME staff do not believe their concerns will be taken seriously.

One person explicitly linked the lack of confidence in the complaints process to institutional racism:

To be an investigator in the Prison Service you need to be of Principal Officer rank or above. As there are few BME staff of this rank, it means that most racial incidents will be investigated by white staff; which will often leave the victim feeling in a state of distrust. This process is an institutionally racist stance by the Prison Service which, unfortunately, a lot of black staff have bought into.

A fundamental flaw is that the procedures for investigating claims of racial discrimination are divisive and legalistic. These methods are poorly suited to responding to racism in its covert and structural forms.

Promotion and the retention of BME staff

The Prison Service has increased its rates of people recruited from BME groups. A target was set of seven per cent of the workforce by 2009. The proportion was 5.69 in 2005, an increase from 2004, but just short of the yearly target of six per cent. In 2004, 8.4 per cent of the new recruits to the Prison Service were from BME groups. However, retention continues to be a problem. In

2004, while BME groups comprised 5.41 per cent of prison staff, the rate of resignations among them was seven per cent.

PRT found that many BME staff believe that subtle discrimination prevents their career development, as they are denied promotion:

Keeping recruitment information away from us, the ethnic minorities and making it available to others, so that they could apply early.

BME staff need training/preparation to seek and gain promotions. No BME staff are in managerial positions to be role models for new staff or on interview panels.

I personally believe that I was not treated fairly when I recently went for a promotion exam. I passed, but then got discredited, after I had received a passing confirmation letter.

The way forward

Race relations policies need to set a very delicate balance between a firm stance against racism and a positive and affirming encouragement of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity.

Promotion –

Prison employers should:

- explore with BME employees why so many feel that they are hindered in their career progression
- consult them about ways of increasing confidence that prison employers offer equal opportunity
- investigate the obstacles within its personnel development strategy which impede the career progress of BME staff
- pursue BME staff development with renewed commitment.

Grievances –

The current system for responding to complaints is poorly suited to resolving problems of covert or unwitting racism. Prison employers should explore other methods, including focused consultation and mediation, to resolve problems encountered by their BME employees. Mediation could attract the confidence of staff who have experienced racism because its framework respects the validity of the BME person's perceptions and gives them more say in how the situation is handled.

Institutional racism –

The Prison Service has made progress in reducing direct racial discrimination. However, the more difficult challenges remain:

- identify the sources of covert and institutional racism
- devise effective solutions which are specifically tailored to address these forms of racism
- implement them fully.

The finding that racial discrimination is most likely to come from work colleagues demonstrates the importance of changing attitudes and increasing cultural awareness through education. Training in diversity and cultural awareness is vital. Yet, this training is even less likely to reach the staff who need it than it was five years ago and the training that is provided is inadequate.

Prison managers should recognise the importance of structural and covert racism, they need to consult BME staff and to build on their experiences. Only when covert and institutional forms of racism are systematically tackled will every member of staff feel confident that the organisation which employs them is fair and respects diversity.

PRISON
REFORM
TRUST



The work of the Prison Reform Trust is aimed at creating a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform.

Prison Reform Trust
15 Northburgh Street
London
EC1V 0JR

Tel: 020 7251 5070
Fax: 020 7251 5076

e-mail: prt@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Registered Charity No 1035525

Company Limited by Guarantee
No 2906362