

The experience of Black, Asian and minority ethnic service users on Probation. Summary of service user views



Take home messages

- Phrases like BAME are problematic as this groups Black, Asian and minority ethnic service users together and assumes people have the same experiences and should be treated the same.
- Most people we spoke to had experienced or witnessed racism in their lives and within criminal justice settings. Some were tired of it and didn't see the point in talking about it because they didn't think it could change. Others found it hard to trust services because of earlier racism.
- Most people haven't received much help from Probation, instead relying on friends, family or faith groups. Racial bias within Probation should be explored.
- Probation Officers don't always know how to open up conversations about race, ethnicity or culture. This can look like they don't want to talk about it.
- 'Matching' officers and service users based on ethnicity is sometimes helpful, particularly in women. But it's not that simple. Successful relationships depend on the individuals and people want support that is fair and based on individual need.
- Service users wanted to see more Black, Asian and minority ethnic Probation Officers, but also more people from minority groups "at the top" so the right changes can be made. They also wanted to see more people who have been on Probation working for them. People wanted Probation to be engaging and relevant to the communities they serve.
- Everyone wanted fair treatment and opportunity, and an understanding that starting positions may be different. Support needs to match that as part of a levelling up process.

"There should be a shared commitment to help us more. Especially because there are so many barriers built against us already in society. Probation don't need to be another one"

For a recent inspection, HM Inspectorate of Probation looked into the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic service users on Probation in the following areas:

- **Bradford and Calderdale**
- **Liverpool and Sefton**
- **Hackney and Tower Hamlets**
 - **Bedfordshire**
 - **Birmingham**

As part of the inspection, EP: IC spoke to service users from ethnic minorities on probation. All the engagement team are from ethnic minorities and have experience of the Criminal Justice System.

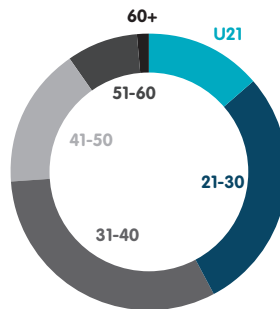
This short report outlines what EP: IC heard from service users.

The full HMIP report can be found [here](#)

Who did we speak to?

We spoke to **81** people between **18** and **61** years old.
62 were male, **19** were female.

- 10%** - under 21 years old
- 21%** - 21-30,
- 23%** - 31-40,
- 12%** - 41-50,
- 6%** - 51-60
- 1%** over 60.



30 service users identified as Asian or Asian British,
33 were Black or Black British,
17 were of Mixed Heritage and **1** self-identified as Arab.



68 (84%) of the sample were on licence having left prison, including three lifers.

We also spoke with women, who had lived experience of being Black and Asian women on Probation and now worked in services to help others.

What did we find?

Background of participants

Lots of people told us they had lived their lives in areas of poverty and had often been exposed to trauma from a young age. This included violence in the home, within their communities and fleeing violence before coming to the UK. Several spoke about witnessing death and devastation. Crime was common in the communities many of our service users lived in. Many had grown up in homes where speaking about feelings was not encouraged. Mental ill-health was seen as a sign of weakness, which prevented them from getting support earlier.

There were cultural issues relating to shame and crime within some communities. This led to service users feeling disconnected to their communities. Everyone who felt this said they had a desire to reconnect and access the support offered in the community.

Racism

Most people experienced racism in some way and they told us how it affected their journey to (and through) the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Even if people hadn't experienced it personally, they had seen it.

Some of this racism was obvious, such as verbal abuse or through being stopped and searched many more times than White people.

We heard people were abused for having a different accent or accused of being linked to certain crimes, such as terrorism, because of the colour of their skin and the way they spoke.

Some racism was less obvious. One example was of how groups of Black women together were seen as aggressive or intimidating by White women in prison. They were asked to disperse by officers. Another example was excessive use of force by Criminal Justice agencies.

“When the police turned up at my Mum’s home to arrest me for my offence, they were armed and kicked in the door. I have never been in trouble before and my offence was not related to violence or drugs yet they came assuming that they needed to be armed. My White friends have never experienced this”.

“A White kid has made a mistake. A Black kid is dangerous, violent.”

Some people felt they were treated differently by Probation because of their ethnicity, believing stereotypes could influence decisions, such as whether they could visit family abroad. However, because this was subtle and indirect, they couldn't be certain.

When speaking about racism, lots of people told us “that's just how it is” and accepted being treated differently as a normal part of life. This meant they did not always challenge things they thought were racist.

People need a safe outlet to share experiences and concerns of racism. Service users need to feel confident Probation will ‘see’, ‘hear’ and ‘believe’ them if they raise concerns about racism. They also need to see Probation are committed to acting upon racism.

Experiences on Probation

Most felt they were treated fairly by Probation, but there were concerns over the lack of support available within the service. This meant people didn't get the help they needed, so the system was seen as unfair to all regardless of race, ethnicity or culture.

When compared to courts and prisons, Probation was seen to be the ‘least racist’ Criminal Justice Service. Although people felt Probation Officers mostly wanted to help them, earlier bad experiences meant it was difficult to trust anyone who works in criminal justice.

We saw examples of good relationships between people on Probation and their officers, and we heard examples of good practice from women and men from different backgrounds. This was important because some service users only had Probation to talk to about their problems, especially where people felt shame about their crime or they need help with mental health.

We heard it can be hard for White probation officers to understand the needs of Black, Asian and minority ethnic service users, but when officers try to understand the different cultural expectations that exist for people, there is a better relationship.

Even within good relationships, some people did not understand the purpose of Probation, especially as appointments were short and didn't result in any practical help.

“Probation is for White people. It doesn't benefit Black women or Black men. Our support needs are different”

There were very few referrals to specialist community services. Only 2 out of 81 people had been referred to agencies who specifically supported people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. However, we found Black-led organisations and faith groups supporting people, though this was not connected with their probation order.

Talking about ethnicity

Race, ethnicity and culture were not often spoken about in Probation sessions. Faith was spoken about more openly.

It was unknown if this was because Probation didn't care, or if they didn't know how to talk about it, or because they were scared about getting it wrong. The general feeling from service users was that officers “lacked interest in race” or “misunderstood their cultural/racial needs”.

Around 1/4 received help from Probation with resettlement needs (e.g. employment, accommodation, drug and alcohol, mental ill-health), although some got help from community services themselves or with help from friends or families. Some people felt they had not received any help at all.

Women found Women's Centres to be ‘lifechanging’ and said being seen as ‘human’ made a difference.

“I wanted support for my childhood trauma but I have not been referred to anyone or anything”

There were mixed messages about whether people on Probation wanted to talk about race, ethnicity or culture. If they had a White Probation Officer, people were more hesitant to discuss this with them. Most thought it could be valuable, but others thought it might be awkward. Better understanding of everyone's barriers in talking about race, ethnicity and culture is an important next step in building relationships.

“There’s so much shame and negative feelings that others in our community have towards families that experience this. It alienates us but if we were able to connect with our community again, we’d have a strong support system”

More people said they spoke felt at ease about race, ethnicity or culture if their Probation Officer was also Black, Asian or from a Minority Ethnic background. Most people thought it was a positive thing to work with someone who wasn’t White, and this was particularly true from the women we spoke with.

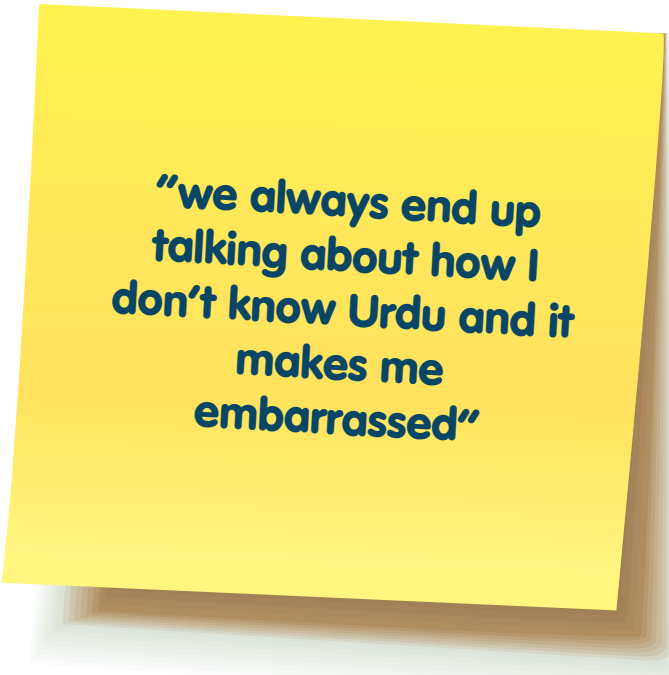
Black and Mixed Heritage women said they felt more comfortable with Probation officers from similar communities.

In contrast, men spoke more about positive relationships with White officers than relationships with officers from similar ethnicities. A few men said sharing ‘cultural expectations’ and talking about crime meant conversations could be difficult and people felt judged.

One Black man told us he felt ashamed working with a younger Black officer. He felt he should be respected as an elder but the service user – officer relationship made it hard.

In contrast, young Black men told us older Black women officers were harsher on them, this as a result of racism: “they don’t want to look to be favouring their own kind”.

Ultimately, people wanted officers to show a genuine interest in them as individuals, which may or may not include ethnicity, race or culture, but resulted in good support and positive outcomes.



“we always end up talking about how I don’t know Urdu and it makes me embarrassed”



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