



## Racist Offending, Policing and Community Conflict

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the Stephen Lawrence inquiry several initiatives have transformed the policing of racism, and have entailed significant changes in the criminal justice system. This article reviews these in the light of our research on racist offenders in Greater Manchester between 1998 and 2001. We argue that racist offending is not necessarily consistent with the assumptions underlying some of these initiatives. The conclusions from this work are then discussed in the context of the disturbances in Oldham and elsewhere in the UK during the summer of 2001. We suggest that constructions of racist offending have given excessive weight to individual motives and intentions, while much offending behaviour is grounded in wider cultural and social contexts. We present the background to these conflicts in terms of a vicious spiral of styles of policing, use of reported statistics and the involvement of racist organizations. We conclude that to explain racist violence we need to think in terms of not a single issue but of multiple issues of bias, and of cultures of violence, exclusions and marginalization.

### **KEY WORDS**

media / Oldham / policing / racist violence / social cohesion

## **Introduction**

**T**his article explores the relationship between policing, racism and community conflict. The arguments presented here arise out of research undertaken in Greater Manchester, UK, between 1998 and 2001 on racially

motivated offenders, the detailed findings of which have been and will be reported elsewhere (Ray et al., 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Ray and Smith, 2001).<sup>1</sup> We focus on the background to recent disturbances in Oldham as a case study in broader issues of understanding racism and community violence. This work is informed by concern with theories of community, solidarity and social bonds, which underpin the more specific focus of this article. The alleged problem of 'Asian-on-White' violence was a key element in the build up to the 'riots' in Oldham in 2001, and featured in media reports, crime and disorder audits, police reporting and in the propaganda of fascist organizations. This article examines the basis for these perceptions and the processes that produced them. The perpetrators of the Oldham conflicts came from some of the most deprived areas of England, and this has been flagged as a major cause of the disturbances (e.g. by Paul Vallely in the *Independent*, 17 May 2001). The Home Office report (2002b) referred to a territorial mentality, residential segregation and the deep fracturing of communities on racial, generational and religious lines, symptomatic of deeper issues of racism, especially racist attacks, and economic exclusion.<sup>2</sup> Racialized and economic structures intersected to create the pre-conditions for violent conflict. However, these conditions alone were not sufficient to create the conditions for the conflicts, in that adjacent boroughs, such as Rochdale, shared many of the demographic characteristics of Oldham but were unaffected by the violence. We argue that to these underlying conditions was added a spiral of policing styles, media representations and far right mobilization.

## The Dilemmas of Social Cohesion

It is increasingly acknowledged that race and racism are complex phenomena and that understandings of race and identity are contested and fluid (e.g. Mac an Ghaill, 1999). Solomos (1993: 244) points to the paradox that attempts to construct a uniform conception of racism lose their ability to analyse processes that lead to racialization of social relations. Further, anti-racist strategies are themselves embedded in particular constructions of whiteness, masculinity and processes of racialization. As we intend to illustrate, theoretical and governmental constructions are thus created through processes of contestation and intervention. For example, Back et al. (1999) argue that the portrait of racism in most studies is limited to the behaviour of young working class men, who are constructed as moral pariahs and 'racist thugs'. This, they argue, is in turn the result of a particular set of discourses which conceal the complexity and variety of expressive racism at all levels. Stereotyped images of the 'white racist' and 'football hooligan' define populations subjected to strategies of maintaining order and establishing new codes of behaviour. Our research too has suggested that dominant images of the racially violent offender are one-dimensional and exaggerate the degree to which such people are politically conscious 'haters'.

Moreover, alongside this figure of the 'white racist' there is, following the disturbances in north-west English towns in 2001, a new figure of 'the Muslim maniac', an image given enhanced potency since 9/11.<sup>3</sup> The disturbances have in turn featured in discourses of 'Britishness' and attempts to define the conditions for assimilation and the policing of difference. Blunkett (2002) argues that 'the centre-Left has never adequately theorized social order – its importance, and the conditions in which it is sustained' but has rather assumed that 'a fair society of free and equal citizens would naturally be a harmonious one'. On the contrary, he argues, community cohesion and a shared sense of civic belonging have to be achieved through 'giving content and meaning to citizenship and nationality'. While he may be right that the centre-Left (and indeed much recent sociological theory) has given inadequate attention to the question of social cohesion, we need to be aware that strategies for its promotion will deploy constructions and assumptions about the social that themselves have social effects. In this case, racialized social and residential divisions are being framed through models of assimilation towards a reanimated notion of 'Britishness', as a putative community into which membership will be regulated. 'Those entering highly advanced countries', says Blunkett, 'find themselves catapulted into effectively different centuries. They are making a journey in the space of a few weeks or months, which it has taken us [sic] hundreds of years to make.' In place of 'unbridled multiculturalism', Blunkett defines a new governmental project aimed at developing a 'shared ground between diverse communities'. We are in the early days of seeing this policy unfold, but the main features appear to be local initiatives such as the Community Strategy partnerships, anti-discrimination legislation and policing initiatives, and a raft of measures to strengthen ethnic monitoring and multicultural education. The latter are built into the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and OFSTED requirements that oblige schools to promote positive acceptance of cultural diversity. However, these are combined with policies that are 'tough on immigration', and, as Giddens (2002) puts it, intended to head off the rise of the racist Right by recognizing 'people's anxieties' over this issue.

Reactions to the 2001 disturbances, along with the discourse of citizenship evident in Blunkett and others, have revived debate about 'assimilation' as a solution to issues of racism and social cohesion (e.g. Back et al., 2002). In a Marxist critique of 1960s concepts of assimilation, Castles and Kosack (1973: 6) argued that 'Immigrants do not have to adapt to universally accepted norms and customs. Rather they are assigned a place in the non-egalitarian social order.' Migrants worked in the least desirable jobs, with below average wages and working conditions, which in turn structure all other aspects of their lives – housing, social facilities, leisure activities and consumption – defining a racially excluded section of the working class (1973: 57). The social stratification of ethnic minorities has become more complex during the past three decades, as has the understanding of the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity (e.g. Bradley, 1996). However, this general 'economic' approach remains a relevant context for understanding the background to the disturbances in

north-west English towns in 2001 partly because of the specific nature of this local economy. During the 1960s, the mill towns such as Oldham and Rochdale invested in new technologies, which were operated 24 hours a day to maximize profit. The night shifts, which were unpopular with the existing workforce, soon became the domain of Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers (Kundnani, 2001). Global restructuring in the 1980s then had particularly dramatic effects in these industrial towns since the collapse of the regional manufacturing base generated high levels of social inequality and structural unemployment, and intensified racial and ethnic divisions. The break in class alignments and social networks that was a general feature of these changes (Brown and Lauder, 2001), along with the globalization of cultural as well as economic ties, transformed the locale in ways that cannot be addressed by policies grounded in the 1950s and 1960s. It was not that South Asians and especially Muslims in north-west England carried with them identities that prevented 'assimilation' but that, in conditions that are explored here, the collapse in social cohesion and the racialized structuring of local societies generated new community tensions.

Central to the Government's response to problems of social cohesion, especially following the Macpherson Report (Macpherson, 1999), was the development of new styles of policing and targeted initiatives to tackle 'hate crimes'. Though a juridical measure, an intention underlying the identification of 'flagged crimes' was to restore social values through the demonstration effect of prosecution of such crimes. As Lawrence puts it, laws against racism and other 'hate crimes' have an expressive function – they publicly denounce acts motivated by hate and affirm a set of collective commitments to harmony and equality (1999: 169). Thus prior to the conflicts in 2001 many (especially Metropolitan) police forces had embarked on initiatives for the policing of racism, intended to reduce community tensions through targeted policing of flagged crimes. But the origins of racism and community tensions are complex, and these initiatives can have unpredictable and unintended consequences. In the case examined here, this strategy inverted the usual attribution of 'white' perpetrator and 'ethnic minority' victim in ways that both illustrate the malleability of concepts of racism and antiracism and set the scene for conflict.

## **Policing of Race Crime**

The policing of racially motivated crime has received high priority in the past few years, especially in the aftermath of the Macpherson Report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Alongside this, the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act introduced the category of 'racially aggravated' offences.<sup>4</sup> These developments have been accompanied by a rapid rise in reported and recorded racially motivated incidents, which nationally showed a rise of 75 percent between 1998 and 1999, and a further doubling to about 48,000 in 2000, half of those being recorded in the Metropolitan police area (Home Office, 2000). In Greater

**Table 1** Reporting of racist incidents

	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Oldham	386	256	238	290	452	646	1113
Greater Manchester	776	595	624	1224	2341	2958	3751
Oldham as percentage of Greater Manchester	50%	43%	38%	24%	19%	22%	30%

Source: Greater Manchester Police (2001) and (2002)

Manchester, the figures followed a similar pattern, rising from 624 in 1997–98 to 1224 in 1998–99, 2341 in 1999–2000, 2958 in 2000–01 and 3751 in 2001–02 (Greater Manchester Police, 2001, 2002). This is set out in more detail in Table 1. However, against this trend it should be noted that the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS) reports *lower* estimated rates of racially motivated offences (about half of them actual attacks) than in the 1995 survey (280,000 against 390,000), in line with its findings of reduced rates of all forms of victimization. Aust et al. (2001), the Section 95 Home Office report for 2000, and Burney et al. (2002) concur that the discrepancy between the BCS and police figures can be explained by greater willingness on the part of victims to report incidents to the police and better recording by the police of incidents reported to them. But the relationship between incidents, reporting and statistics remains complex. In this discussion we treat official statistics as outcomes of complex processes of construction and amplification that are generated reflexively in that they influence the policing and reporting practices that they also reflect.

This is a contested terrain crucially affected by victim politics and the ability of social movements to set agendas for public policy and governmental strategies. In June 1999, for example, the London Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) set up Community Safety Units with specialist skills in investigating hate crimes, which would provide support and advice, gather intelligence, pursue, arrest and prosecute hate crime, and liaise with other agencies. In the process extensive statistical data are collected that inform policy and public debate. However, we should be aware that there are amplifying processes here, and in particular that ‘what’s counted counts’. The publication of headline statistics feeds into the setting of police targets, is subject to analysis of trends, is reported and debated in the media, becomes an object of further campaigning, stimulates further research and so on. The generation of ‘hate crime’ as a public issue is thus a cyclical process in which an agenda is shaped by institutional practices, data generation and campaigns.

‘Hate crimes’, especially racist violence, tend to be conceived as the acts of consciously motivated ‘haters’ who are strangers to their victims (as in the Stephen Lawrence case) and who target the victim as a member of the hated social group. Our research (as we have argued elsewhere, e.g. Ray et al., 2003a)

suggests that while there clearly *are* committed racist offenders, the motivation underlying the majority of what ends up being classified as a racist incident is often ambiguous. Burney et al. (2002: 13) report that this ambiguity is characteristic even of those cases ostensibly clear-cut enough to have been prosecuted as racially aggravated offences, since 'proving motive can be very difficult'. Racist violence further has its origin in the taken-for-granted everyday racism of offenders' communities, which is deployed in a situation of conflict and potential violence. Whatever the causes of the violence in English towns in 2001, its collective, communal nature calls for social rather than individualistic explanations.

## Trouble up North – The Disturbances in Oldham

The problems of race and policing received national attention in several north-west English towns during the disturbances in the Spring of 2001,<sup>5</sup> including Oldham, where there had been a history of inter-ethnic conflict and far-Right activity since the early 1990s. The peculiarity of Oldham was something of which we became aware early in our research in Manchester, and for which some explanation seemed to be required. The police division covering Oldham has had since 1994 a pattern of recorded racist incidents quite different from any other division in Greater Manchester (Greater Manchester Police, 2001, 2002). Not only is the number of incidents disproportionately high for Oldham's population, the number of incidents with white victims consistently far exceeds that of any other division, although this difference may be diminishing (see Table 2).<sup>6</sup> This illustrates the fluidity of racialization and anti-racism

**Table 2** Victimization by ethnicity (percent)

**Table 2a** Oldham

	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Asian	38%	46%	39%	49%
Black	7%	6%	5%	3%
Other	2%	3%	6%	1%
White	53%	44%	49%	47%
	100%	100%	100%	100%
	n=269	n=494	n=693	n=1039

**Table 2b** Greater Manchester

	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Asian	54%	52%	47%	53%
Black	11%	13%	11%	8%
Other	9%	12%	15%	5%
White	26%	23%	27%	35%
	100%	100%	100%	100%
	n=1207	n=2566	n=3255	n=3698

Source: Greater Manchester Police (2001) and (2002)

as processes generated by social practices and agency interventions. The problem of racist violence in Oldham has been defined as essentially a problem of 'hate crimes' by young South Asian men against vulnerable whites. This discussion examines the dynamics of this situation.

We acknowledge that there is a risk in this kind of discussion of 'ontological gerrymandering', that is, of treating some social problems as socially constructed and others as somehow 'real facts' at one's political convenience. In this way, some areas are portrayed as ripe for ontological doubt and others are portrayed as (at least temporarily) immune to doubt (Travers, 1997; Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985, 1986). Again, Webster (1996) argues that 'studies about violent racism tend to *assume* that Asian and black people alone are victims of inter-ethnic violence', whereas during the period of his study Asian-on-white attacks increased 'in the context of an unfolding story of Asian vigilantism based on territorialism'. It is not our intention to suggest that figures reporting rising attacks by whites on ethnic minorities are valid while those pointing to violence perpetrated by Asians are invalid. We are rather concerned to take a critical distance from official representations of social problems and examine the effects that these have on the processes they purport to represent.

Patterns of incidence of recorded crimes, including racist crimes, will be crucially affected by the particular forms taken by the local coalescence of key actors such as the local and national media, the police, political groups and welfare organizations. In Oldham the allegedly high incidence of 'Asian on white' racism received considerable publicity in the national media in the early months of 2001, having been a long-standing concern of the local press, especially the *Oldham Chronicle*. The distinctive pattern of recorded racially motivated violence in Oldham illustrates two issues. First, the central role of the police and media in the local construction of the problem of racist violence; and second, the way in which the representation of the problem as one of 'Asian-on-white' violence can open out a space in which the political far right can mobilize successfully.<sup>7</sup>

According to the police figures, the Oldham division, with around nine percent of the total population of Greater Manchester and a similar percentage of the total ethnic minority population (according to the 1991 census), produced 43 percent of all 'racial incidents'<sup>8</sup> in 1996–97, half of whose victims were white; this accounted for 77 percent of all 'white' victims in Greater Manchester in that year. A similar pattern was reported for each of the subsequent years to 1999–2000, when 52 percent of the 646 Oldham victims were 'white', making up 38 percent of all 'white' victims recorded by the Greater Manchester police in that year. In the same year, 46 percent of all 'Asian' suspects in racist incidents were from Oldham. The exceptionality of Oldham may be diminishing, but it is still distinctive within Greater Manchester.

Racist violence in Oldham is more likely to be perpetrated in groups than in the rest of Manchester. The figures from the 2000–01 Racist Incident Monitoring Report suggest that the proportion of racist incidents involving groups (as opposed to lone perpetrators) in Oldham is only slightly higher than

for Greater Manchester as a whole (27% against 21%). However, Oldham accounted for 35 percent of racist incidents involving groups, though only 22 percent of incidents overall. So the chances of being involved in a group incident were greater in Oldham than elsewhere. In Oldham, 128 white victims (37% of white complainants) and 40 (22%) Asian victims report attacks by groups of perpetrators, so whites in Oldham are especially likely to report an incident involving a group. Most racist incidents take place either at victims' homes or on the street (Burney et al., 2002). In Greater Manchester as a whole, 43 percent of incidents are at home and 30 percent on the street. But in Oldham, reflecting the pattern of group incidents, 37 percent are at home and 43 percent on the street. In themselves, these figures demonstrate nothing conclusive, but they suggest that street violence involving groups is more prevalent in Oldham than elsewhere in Greater Manchester.

So, patterns of reported racist abuse differed in Oldham from the rest of Manchester. We argue that the causes of this difference, its reporting, and the police response to it contributed to the violence in 2001. Further, there is here an issue not previously addressed, as to why the violence erupted in Oldham but not in the neighbouring borough of Rochdale, which shares many of Oldham's demographic characteristics. Let us consider these issues more closely.

### Deprivation and Segregation

It is possible that the high level of recorded racist violence in Oldham might be explained by demographic or economic factors unique to the town. Researchers have been interested in the spatial distribution of racist violence and what might explain it. Sibbitt (1997), for example, argues that rates of white racist violence and harassment tend to be highest in socially deprived areas where a high proportion of the residents have difficulties in social functioning, and use ethnic minorities as convenient scapegoats for their own sense of failure and resentment. Hewitt (1996) found that racist attitudes and behaviour were most prevalent in areas where residents saw themselves as under some territorial threat, and as defending a 'white hinterland' against encroachment by ethnic minorities. In such areas, a local culture of racism can develop among young people (perhaps with the tacit support of their elders), in which ethnic minorities are perceived as receiving unfairly privileged treatment in the employment and housing markets. Smith (1989), discussing electoral support for the National Front, cites Taylor (1982) in suggesting that support tended to be highest in neighbourhoods with small ethnic minority populations but adjacent to areas with a much higher proportion of non-white people in the population.<sup>9</sup> This pattern was repeated in the 2002 and 2003 local elections in Burnley, a town that shares many of Oldham's characteristics.

Our own material on perpetrators of racist violence in Greater Manchester, including Oldham, is also broadly in line with these conclusions. Oldham ranked 33rd most deprived out of 354 local authorities in England on the 1991

Index of Deprivation. Oldham is among the worst 40 authorities on six of the 13 indicators – death rates, overcrowded housing, derelict land, 17-year-olds remaining in full-time education, household premiums and levels of car ownership. The economic profile is typical of a town in which communities were based on manufacturing that has now significantly declined with the global movement of production into emerging economies.<sup>10</sup> In 1998, manufacturing was still more significant than in the UK as a whole, accounting for 29.3 percent of employment and 38.8 percent of local GDP, although this had fallen from 30.8 percent of employment and 42.2 percent of GDP in 1995 (Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 2002). Unemployment was slightly lower than the average for the north west (4.3 percent against 4.9 percent). But the ‘real rate’ (taking account of those placed onto Incapacity Benefit but who would like to work) is estimated at 16.7 percent, which places it above the rate for the region and the UK as a whole (Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 2002). Moreover, there is a high degree of social differentiation in Oldham, where two areas (Saddleworth East and Saddleworth West) are in the *least* deprived 10 percent of the country, while Coldhurst, St. Marys, Werneth, Alexandra and St. James rank among the worst 10 percent (Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 2002). These areas of Oldham have unemployment rates of 40 percent (Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 1999).

Moreover, the wards most affected by the conflicts were among the 20 percent most deprived in the country, with one, Glodwick, ranked among the 100 most deprived out of 102,000 enumeration districts. There was further a racialized pattern to this deprivation, with only 16 percent of whites living in the worst 20 percent enumeration districts, compared with 71 percent of Pakistanis and 87 percent of Bangladeshis (Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 1994: 23). The Asian population is young, with 66 percent under 24 years old and 5 percent of pensionable age, against 34 percent and 17 percent respectively for the Borough as a whole. This exacerbates the impact of unemployment, which is markedly higher among Bangladeshi (25 percent) and Pakistani (16 percent) communities than for Oldham as a whole (Commission for Racial Equality, 2002; Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 1993). These factors have resulted in a pattern of urban segregation and deprivation structured by and exacerbating racism. That segregation fosters conditions for reinforcement of mutual stereotyping, resentment and hostility is well documented (e.g. Home Office, 2002a, b). We found that communities incorporated racialized ‘maps’ of the borough that were drawn along territorial lines marked by mutual suspicion and hostility, and in particular that community-based stereotypes projected the experience of economic and social disadvantage onto racialized scapegoats (Ray and Smith 2001; Ray et al., 2003a).

The Home Office report into the disturbances put considerable weight on residential segregation, a term the authors note was ‘rarely used in discussion of community relations in Britain’ (Home Office, 2002a: 12). Indeed, a general theme of the commentaries on the census findings on ethnicity and residence is that there is little evidence of the emergence of the ‘hypersegregation’ found in

American cities, which earlier work (e.g. Peach et al., 1981) tended to assume would also appear in Britain. It is true that residential segregation does appear to have been a factor in the background to rising community tensions in Oldham, but this account only takes us so far, since Rochdale, which was not affected by the violence, has similar socio-economic and demographic patterns (Rees and Phillips, 1996a). In terms of the composition of the population (based on census self-identification), there were more Indians and Bangladeshis in Oldham, and more Pakistanis in Rochdale, but the differences in the proportions are not large, and it is difficult to see how they could explain Oldham's pattern of racialized violence. Rees and Phillips (1996b) also discuss the degree of segregation of different minority groups in a number of 'Pennine towns', including Oldham and Rochdale. Using the 'index of differentiation', they show that in both towns, Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis all have higher scores than the same groups in Manchester itself, and that in both towns the degree of segregation of all these groups is among the highest in the areas studied.<sup>11</sup> Oldham and Rochdale are both areas in which manufacturing is declining and which have not yet seen widespread alternative economic development. Rochdale is the 29th most deprived district in England, with unemployment above the national average, eight out of 20 wards in the most deprived 10 per cent and 19 in the most deprived third (Rochdale Metropolitan Borough, 2001). Table 3 shows the index of differentiation for selected ethnic groups in Greater Manchester. Both Oldham and Rochdale show high levels of differentiation for the Pakistani (76 and 69 respectively) and Bangladeshi (79 and 88) communities. This pattern of residential segregation is symptomatic of underlying structural conditions:

- systematic disadvantage in that many members of ethnic minorities can only afford cheaper housing;
- higher unemployment than in the majority community, especially in Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities;
- cultural cohesion and choice among minority communities, which is possibly linked to fear of racist attacks and hostility from the surrounding areas (Home Office, 2002a); and
- discrimination in council housing allocation that has been a major cause of residential segregation (Commission for Racial Equality, 1993).

However, while urban segregation was probably a factor underlying community tensions in Oldham this is not a sufficient explanation. The residential segregation and deprivation data imply that both Oldham and Rochdale should have relatively high rates of racist violence, not that the Oldham rate should be 50 percent higher (Greater Manchester Police, 2001), or that the type and pattern of its violence should be markedly different. Segregation was a factor in creating the preconditions for the conflict but it operated in conjunction with a spiral of media and police perceptions that were crucial to understanding the background to the events of 2001.

**Table 3** Index of differentiation (0–100) for selected ethnic groups in Greater Manchester

	<i>Black-Caribbean</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>Pakistani</i>	<i>Bangladeshi</i>
Bolton	38	65	68	54
Bury	26	26	57	46
Manchester	44	29	42	49
Oldham	43	53	76	79
Rochdale	22	45	69	88
Salford	33	27	45	55
Stockport	28	40	47	46
Tameside	27	56	59	70
Trafford	73	55	67	45

Source: Rees and Phillips (1996: 28)

### Media Reporting

We argue, then, that the Oldham figures on racist violence are at least in part the product not only of economic, demographic or even political distinctiveness but of the particular local definition of the problem of racist hate crime that has prevailed since the mid-1990s. This indicates how social mobilization and agency interventions (that is, a particular strategy of governmentality) established a racialization of issues of crime and disorder. There has been considerable controversy over the role of the local media, especially the *Oldham Chronicle*, whose offices were attacked during the disturbances. The local media was frequently accused of failure to report racial attacks on Asians, so contributing to the distrust and alienation felt by many Asians. Callers to local phone-in programmes claimed that the *Oldham Chronicle's* news coverage was biased and ignored racist attacks on Asians. The editor (Jim Williams) was reported as describing some alleged attacks on Asians as 'urban myths' although he conceded that the paper had not reflected the life of the Asian communities (BBC, 2001a).<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the local media had tended to portray Asian young men as potentially violent and threatening. This is part of a wider system of racialized representations of Asian youth as a new 'folk devil' that has served to focus media and public attention on this 'problem group' (Alexander, 2000: 4). During the 1990s, local media reporting in Oldham had emphasized the 'threat' of Asian violence with headlines such as 'RACIST ATTACKS BY ASIAN GANGS' (*Oldham Chronicle*, 17 March 1998) and 'HUGE RISE IN RACE ATTACKS ON WHITE MEN' (31 January 2001). The latter story repeated a frequent theme that racist crime in Oldham had reached 'record levels' with a massive increase (to 60 percent of all incidents) in violent attacks on whites. This, it suggests, reveals a 'worrying trend' in such violence over the past few months, in which gangs of between five and 20 Asian youths would target victims. The police were reported as promising to increase patrols in areas in which these

attacks took place and to press for the installation of CCTV cameras (although similar action was not proposed to protect people in areas with high reported incidence of attacks on Asians).

Thus a definition of 'the problem' in Oldham emerged initially with the full authority of the police and was reproduced with little or no critical commentary in the local press. The trend towards white victimization was treated as an established fact in the local authority's crime and disorder audit (Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 1999). According to the audit, not only was the pattern of victimization inexplicably distinct from that in other police divisions, but reported incidents were more likely than in the country as a whole to involve serious violence. The audit is careful to note that the rate of victimization per 1000 in the population was greater for the 'Asian community' than for whites (Oldham Metropolitan Borough, 1999). But it was the problem of 'RACIST ATTACKS BY ASIAN GANGS' (headline, *Oldham Chronicle*, 17 March 1998) that consistently received most publicity and was emphasized by the police divisional commander, as quoted in the local press. The *Chronicle* of 24 February 1999 suggested that there had been 'huge surprise' when the 'head of Oldham police' said in the previous year that the majority of victims of racist crimes were white. This surprise is difficult to understand since the pattern was already well established in the crime statistics, and a similar announcement in January 2001 was another repetition of a by now familiar story. Racist violence in Oldham was now firmly defined by the police and the local media in a way that stressed its distinctiveness and difference, in terms of the overall gravity of the problem and the particular contribution to it of Asian youth. At the same time, Asian market traders in Oldham (from a local Open Market Traders' Association) reported to us that they had been subject to intensified police surveillance from early 2001. Whether or not this was actually reflected in the level of police activity, this perception signified deteriorating trust in the police among some South Asians. Asian youth in Oldham display a pattern of resentment and anger in response to experiences of racism, abuse and economic and social marginalization. Local residents in Glodwick talked of 'people coming into the area from outside threatening and assaulting Asian residents' but of having little confidence in the police. Ashid Ali (chair of Oldham Bangladeshi Youth Association) spoke of violence 'clearly sparked by whites' who had for weeks beforehand been harassing Asian neighbourhoods (BBC, 2001b).

In defence against subsequent allegations of 'media vilification' of Oldham Asians, the *Chronicle* defended its record by claiming that it had 'reported acts of violence against the person – whatever the colour and creed ... with equal vigilance' (*Chronicle*, 28 May 2001). As we have indicated, we are not denying that Asian 'vigilantism' occurred, especially in the weeks prior to the disturbances. However, the balance of the *Chronicle's* reporting contributed to the particular construction of the problem. The *Chronicle* did not at the time have any Asian reporters or network of Asian correspondents sending in community news. Reports of crimes committed by white youths in the town were 'balanced' by wider coverage of positive stories about (for example) commu-

nity activities and weddings. However, there were not, in the main, equivalent stories about Asian life, which contributed to the construction of the Muslim community as 'violent thugs'. Deteriorating relationships between the police and Asian youth were reported by community leaders, especially in relation to allegations in the local and national press of the existence of 'no-go' areas for whites.

In this context we suggest that the figures on racist incidents have been produced by a greater readiness on the part of whites than of Asians to report incidents they believe to be racially motivated, and willingness to believe this has itself been encouraged by the police and media accounts of the problem since the mid-1990s. Asians, particularly the young men who have featured in these accounts as the main perpetrators of racist violence, came to believe that there was no point in reporting incidents to the police, on the grounds that they are likely to be met with disbelief or victim-blaming. In this way, the pattern of reporting racist incidents could become systematically skewed, with important social effects. Further, alienation from and distrust of the police contributed to the emergence of a pattern of violence that is in fact different from that of other parts of Greater Manchester, as young Asian men came to see direct vigilante action as a feasible alternative to police involvement. Johnston (1996) after all sees vigilantism as a nascent social movement. The repeated representation of these young men as a threat to social order and in particular to innocent whites promoted fear, suspicion and hatred among sections of the white population – a possibility not lost on far right political groups, whose interest in Oldham long preceded the violent conflicts of the spring of 2001.

### Racist Organizations

Deprivation, segregation, media reporting and the reported pattern of 'hate crimes' together created conditions for acute community tensions. In this context, Oldham had for a long time, at least since the early 1990s, been a target of organized racist activity. In our interviews with racist offenders, respondents generally showed very low levels of knowledge of organized racist groups and there was little to suggest that their offending had been influenced by the presence of such groups (Ray et al., 2003a). Respondents from Oldham showed greater knowledge and awareness. For example:

Yeah – like I say – well most people in the land have heard of NF haven't they, because they are like the biggest one. But there's like Combat 18. I suppose it is in Oldham and places like that. You get to hear about it... . You'd have to live a very sheltered life to have not have heard of them.

The same respondent expressed fairly typical sentiments of communal fear and encroachment:

I think if you ask most people in Oldham and they'll say do you think Asian people are racist towards us, and they will give you yeah. Nine times out of ten ...

You do read in the paper a lot about gangs of Asian lads worrying people in Oldham ... you never hear about them getting caught, ... there's Asian lads beating up white lads [but this isn't seen as racist] ... I think that's grossly unfair.

The relative electoral success of the British National Party (BNP) in Oldham in the 2001 general election can be understood as an expression of such fear and hatred, emerging and finding political expression from a background of everyday, but normally latent and tacit, sentiments of racism and resentment. While the BNP's public posture during the election campaign was one that disavowed violence and indeed racism, presenting the issues in terms of cultural rather than racial differences, it had issued a leaflet in 1998 that proclaimed that 'Community self-defence is no offence!' and encouraged the use of force to rescue white victims from 'gangs of Muslim thugs'.<sup>13</sup> The BNP thus sought to legitimize white violence against Asians on the traditional vigilante's ground of self-defence, and in doing so it was able to draw on the accounts of Asian-on-white violence presented to the press over several years by the 'embattled' divisional police commander (BNP website, 4 February 1999). The police and the local press condemned the far right, but in Oldham racist violence was being defined in a way that exacerbated an already polarized situation in which mutual fear and suspicion grew.

It was in this context that after the violent disturbances the *Oldham Chronicle* gave legitimacy to the BNP by running interviews with its leader, Nick Griffin, during the election campaign, implying that he was just another political leader like any other. This legitimization was made explicit after the election when the paper opined (11 June 2001):

The political landscape in Oldham has changed and though the ANL [Anti-Nazi League] might not like it, it has been changed through the proper democratic process by Mr Nick Griffin and his British National Party campaigning properly and legally and persuading people to vote for them. Mr Griffin and the BNP now has a mandate from 11000 Oldham residents to represent their point of view and has promised to contest next May's elections. At a stroke, the BNP has gained political legitimacy in Oldham.

White residents of areas close to neighbourhoods with a large Asian population feel threatened and at risk, and become more likely to report to the police incidents that might have gone unreported in a less fearful environment. At the same time, Asian young men, already alienated and marginalized (and, despite the perceptions of the offenders interviewed for our research, more likely than whites to be unemployed), find a construction of their behaviour in which they have potency. Violent incidents, disproportionately those involving white victims, become statistics, which are publicized, analysed and used to define targets for policing. The experience of Oldham is thus a microcosm of the process in which media presentation of a crime problem, originally reflecting police definitions of the problem, comes to influence and justify policing practice, in a classic case of amplification.

## Conclusion

Racism, anti-racism and policing are embedded in a complex web of processes. They are fluid categories whose meaning will be shaped by social movements and specific interventions. In the events considered here, from the police perspective, the need to ensure public order and comply with the demands of the post-Macpherson context entailed a proactive and 'evidence-led' approach to policing racist crime. But police perceptions were shaped in part by media reporting and the production of data that were themselves the outcome of a non-transparent set of practices. Thus the media representations of the 'threat' from 'Asian thugs' defined agendas for policing while further encouraging the inversion of the usual relationship between victim and perpetrator of racist violence. This was being played out in a context of urban economic and social decline, which was a local manifestation of a global economic restructuring involving the shift from an industrial base in textiles and chemicals to a service economy, to which the north-west towns had had difficulty in adapting. These economic changes were manifest in areas of high unemployment and deprivation that were further divided on racial lines through high levels of residential segregation. At the same time white working-class communities offloaded resentment at economic decline and social decay onto apparent representatives of a 'cosmopolitan' culture – a view framed in part by the context of media representations. Into this fraught situation the British National Party (and, though less effectively, the National Front) identified Oldham as a target for mobilization of the working-class white constituency, playing particularly on fears of racist attacks. That this perception was apparently being promoted in official statistics and the mainstream media arguably increased the legitimacy of the BNP's position, while increasing the alienation of the South Asian, especially Muslim, community. This in our view explains why violence erupted in Oldham but not in Rochdale, despite many structural similarities.

## Notes

- 1 The findings reported in this article are based on an ESRC research project, 'Racial Violence in Greater Manchester'. Researchers: David Smith (Lancaster University), Larry Ray (University of Kent at Canterbury) and Liz Wastell (Greater Manchester Probation Service). Ref: L13325019.
- 2 These data are largely based on the 1991 Census, although summary data from the 2001 census are becoming available (see URL (consulted May 2004): <http://www.oldham.gov.uk/council/publications/policyreports/policyreports.shtml/>).
- 3 British Home Secretary David Blunkett said that those jailed for their part in these disturbances were 'maniacs [who] actually burned down their own businesses, their own job opportunities. They discouraged investment in their areas.' He further described those protesting at sentences of up to eight-and-a-half years as 'bleeding heart liberals'. (Ananova News, 5 September 2002, URL

- [consulted May 2004]: [http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm\\_664790.html/](http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_664790.html/)).
- 4 Conviction for a racially aggravated offence is meant to lead (and in fact (Burney et al., 2002) does lead) to a more severe sentence than for the same offence without a racial motive, on the grounds that to be assaulted or otherwise offended against because of one's identity as a member of a particular social or ethnic group is more frightening and emotionally disturbing than to be selected as a victim for other reasons.
  - 5 The main centres were Bradford (April and July), Burnley (June) and Oldham (May). There was a total of 1500 incidents of violent disorder, 476 people injured and around £10 million worth of damage done (Home Office, 2002a).
  - 6 It was also slightly more common in Oldham than for Greater Manchester as a whole for racist incidents to involve violence – 18 percent of all incidents in Oldham against 13 percent for Greater Manchester.
  - 7 The racist British National Party (BNP) gained a higher share of the vote (about 16 percent) in the two Oldham constituencies than anywhere else in the general election of June 2001. This success followed months of campaigning, and the more successful of the two candidates was the party's national leader, Nick Griffin, a Cambridge University graduate who personifies the BNP's efforts to acquire an 'acceptable', media-friendly face. In the May 2002 local elections, the BNP total vote in five targeted wards in Oldham was 4391, which represented 26.87 percent of the vote (against a national average in wards contested of 12 percent).
  - 8 'Racist' replaced 'racial' in the annual police reports on such incidents in 1999.
  - 9 This pattern continued in the 2003 local elections where support for the BNP in Oldham was highest (between 28 and 34 percent) in 'white' wards adjacent to those with higher ethnic minority populations. URL (consulted May 2004): <http://www.oldham.gov.uk/press/user/pressview.asp?refno=AI/PR/CE/29/03/>.
  - 10 The 'family' of such towns includes Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley, Pendle, Rossendale, Salford and Tameside, as well as Oldham and Rochdale, in the north west of England (Rochdale Metropolitan Borough, 2002).
  - 11 The Index of Differentiation (on a scale of 0–100) measures the spatial distance between each minority group and the white majority. The higher the score, the greater the residential segregation.
  - 12 The *Chronicle* is a successful local paper with daily sales of 30,000 and an estimated readership of 82,000, nearly half the adult population, two-thirds of whom read all the editorial and news pages (URL (consulted May 2004): <http://www.oldham-chronicle.co.uk/>).
  - 13 URL (consulted May 2004): [www.bnp.net/nw/oldham.html/](http://www.bnp.net/nw/oldham.html/).

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