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## Addressing Racial Harassment in Rural Communities

**CJS 6/2005.** This article provides a brief overview of racial harassment issues in rural areas, drawing from evidence in Scotland as well as England, and identifies critical issues that require to be considered in developing effective strategies for addressing racial harassment in rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

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### Context

The issue of racism and racial harassment has received widespread attention following the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry and the recommendations arising from the MacPherson Report (The Stephen Lawrence Enquiry 1999). Evidence of increased activity on race equality issues has certainly been more apparent in rural areas following the report. Other factors have also played an important role in bringing the issue to the fore: for example, the emphasis on Community Safety Strategies, the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) and the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000). Furthermore, growing research on rural race issues (e.g. Garland et al 2002; Netto et al 2001; de Lima 2001a; Dhalech 1999), as well as recent publications, such as the edited collection by Chakraborti and Garland (2004), have also helped to raise the profile.

Racial harassment includes verbal or written abuse, physical attacks on persons or

property and behaviour deemed to be intimidating. It is the motive of the perpetrator, that is racial hatred, and the impact on the victims - for example distress or fear caused - which makes an act into '*racial harassment*' (Limos 2000). Whilst acknowledging that defining 'rural' is the subject of much debate and it is important to recognise that rural areas are diverse, these issues will not be addressed in this article (see de Lima 2001b).

### Racist Incidents: Data Sources

The main sources of statistics on racial harassment tend to include: recorded crime statistics, police annual reports, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) reports, the British and the Scottish Crime Surveys, agencies at regional level with race equality remits (for example, Race Equality Councils (RECs) ), and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) drawing on information based on rates of incidents reported at regional level through

such agencies as the RECs. Furthermore, there are a number of reports at national (English, Welsh and Scottish) and at local levels, which have focused on experiences of racial harassment in rural contexts (e.g. Chakraborti et al (ed) 2004; Garland et al 2002; de Lima 2001a; Morris 2000).

Information on racist incidents for many rural areas has undoubtedly become more readily available since 1998, as a result of the policy and legal changes already highlighted. In general it would appear that where there are effective multi-agency partnership initiatives or race equality infrastructures - i.e. organisations with a responsibility to address race equality issues such as The Racial Attacks and Harassment Multi-Agency Strategy Partners (RAHMAS 2001) in Central Scotland and Suffolk Multi-agency Forum Against Racial Harassment (2001) in England, amongst others - there appears to be a much more co-ordinated approach to addressing racial harassment and data gathering.

In contrast, where relevant infrastructures do not exist, data can be patchy and difficult to come by. Indeed in some rural areas, particularly those lacking in race equality infrastructures for example, in areas such as the Highlands and Islands and the Scottish Borders - even getting a multi-agency racial incident strategy off the ground, let alone providing adequate support to victims of racist harassment, has been fraught with difficulties and is still not consistently addressed across rural Scotland. It would appear that the main barriers to establishing such infrastructures are due to a complex combination of factors: the existence of small numbers of diverse (culturally and socio-economically), and scattered minority ethnic households, makes it difficult to bring these households together and to build their capacity to argue collectively for their needs to be met; variable senior management commitment amongst agencies; the reluctance of agencies to take on a lead role in getting initiatives off the ground; and the lack of allocation of resources to address the issue.

There are a number of consistent themes that emerge on the issue of data on racist incidents/harassment: (i) the approaches used to record and monitor racist incidents/harassment are inconsistent; (ii) there is an increase in reported racist incidents across most rural areas, (see below); (iii) there are issues of under-reporting and under-recording.

The quality of information and the way in which incidents are recorded, categorised and presented are inconsistent, making it difficult to compare statistics across areas and even within areas (CRE 2005). This may be due to a variety of reasons including, different approaches to disaggregating incident types and inconsistent approaches to disaggregating by ethnicity and other relevant variables, such as gender and age. See for example '[Racist Crime and Victimisation in Scotland](#)' data.

Despite the increase in levels of recorded racial incidents, there is reason to believe that under-reporting and under-recording are issues which require to be tackled. Evidence suggests that there are continuing difficulties experienced in persuading victims to report racist incidents (CRE 2005; de Lima, 2001; 2004; [Central Scotland Demographic Information](#)). The barriers to reporting incidents comes into a sharp focus in rural areas given the size and dispersed nature of the minority ethnic populations and due to fear of reprisals. Other factors which are also relevant include, lack of capacity building support for rural minority ethnic people to develop confidence to access systems of justice, absence of local expertise to deal with victims, lack of effective recording and monitoring systems amongst agencies; communication difficulties arising from lack of interpretation and translation facilities, and often what is perceived as the slow response of police to their complaints. In addition, often victims fail to report instances of verbal abuse because these are perceived as not being serious, and not worth bothering the police about, as well as due to a belief that nothing can be done to change the attitudes of the perpetrators (de Lima 2001a). The idea that

minority ethnic people do not belong in rural areas and are 'passing through' is an aspect of verbal abuse which can lead to an erosion of self confidence, as reflected in the words of a young woman of Asian background who has lived in a rural area in Scotland all her life:

*"You are not allowed to belong here. People assume you are passing through . . . they ask you if you are on holiday . . . this can be undermining."*

### **The extent of racial harassment in rural areas**

Without exception, research reports highlight the prevalence of racism and discrimination in the day to day lives of minority ethnic households living in rural areas (Chakraborti et al (ed) 2005; The Robert Gordon University and Grampian Racial Equality Council 2004; de Lima 2001).

The vulnerability of rural minority ethnic groups to racism has been brought into sharp focus by Rayner (2001; 2005). In 2001, based on Home Office figures on racist incidents in England and Wales, Rayner reported that ethnic minorities in low density ethnic areas were at greater risk of being attacked on racial grounds. For example, Northumbria topped the list and was closely followed by Devon and Cornwall and South Wales. Comparable statistics were not available for Scotland at the time. Four years later in 2005, using Home Office data, he argues that the situation has worsened. Drawing on the prevalence of racist incidents in Britain according to the size of the ethnic minority population in police authority areas, he notes that the safest areas were those with the largest ethnic minority populations (e.g. London). In contrast, minorities in rural areas were two to even four times more likely to have experienced racism. For example, he notes, "[. . .] Northumbria Devon and Cornwall, and most of all Wales and Scotland &ndash; prove the most dangerous." (Rayner 2005, p16). Commenting on Scotland, he notes the difficulties in obtaining more detailed breakdown of racist incident statistics by

police area. Citing Scottish Executive figures that there were 3,801 recorded racist incidents in Scotland in 2002/3, he goes on to argue:

*"We can say that, with an ethnic minority population of just over 100,000 according to the 2001 census, Scotland as a whole is one of the 10 worse areas in Britain."* (Rayner 2005 p16)

The trends identified by Rayner (2002; 2005) are supported by local evidence across rural Britain where such data has been available, (Suffolk Multi-agency Forum Against Racial Harassment, 2001; RAHMAS, 2001). Often, a racial harassment incident is not a "one off" event, but part of a series of ongoing experiences, in the words of one rural worker:

*"People are 'spat at' on a daily basis . . . they put up with it because they have got to live here. In the past when they have contacted the police they did nothing, so people feel why bother?"*

Verbal abuse is the most common form of racist abuse experienced, however this does not preclude other incidents such as physical assaults, damage to property and acts of vandalism. Research suggests that the location of racial harassment is more likely to be close to or aimed at peoples' homes. In addition, some groups appear to be more at risk than others: for example, those from visible minorities, Gypsy Travellers and businesses. In the Stirlingshire area, RAHMAS (2001 p3) highlighted that, of the 169 racist incidents recorded, 106 (63%) occurred within business premises. There was evidence of repeat victimisation and 25 incidents involved physical violence. The vulnerability of 'visible' minorities to racist incidents, was, for example highlighted by Grampian Racial Equality Council (GREC 2005) in their report on racist incidents in the Highlands for the period May to December 2004.

There has been very little research on the impact of racism on people's lives in a rural context. RAHMAS (2001:3), however, noted

the following effects of racist crimes on minority ethnic businesses: negative impact on confidence, self esteem and ultimately the physical and mental health of the victim, contributing to social exclusion, and constraints on business growth and development.

In some rural areas much effort has gone into developing outreach facilities and surgeries, and evidence suggests that where such initiatives exist there is an increase in the numbers of minority ethnic people making contact with the outreach services (for example, in Norfolk, NNREC, 1998). In addition multi-agency partnerships such as Racist Attacks and Harassment Multi Agency Strategy (RAHMAS) in Central Scotland are also important in developing a coherent policy framework and coordinated strategies for delivering race equality. Often the lack of resources and expertise at local level, and the absence of infrastructures ( i.e. organisations with the remit and the authority to tackle race and other equality issues) have been the main barriers to addressing issues such as racist incidents effectively. However, the importance of having some basic infrastructure is illustrated clearly by the presence of Central Race Equality Council (CREC) in Scotland, which has played an important role in developing RAHMAS. RAHMAS is based on a multi-agency partnership approach and provides an important mechanism for co-ordinating race equality initiatives across Central Scotland (which encompasses rural and urban areas) including a central monitoring system which is used to inform practice.

Based on analysis of a range of initiatives undertaken to address issues of racist harassment and incidents in rural areas, the following factors appear critical if racist incidents are to be taken seriously:

- clear and explicit commitment from the local senior management of key agencies to a multi-agency approach, matched by allocation of financial resources devoted to addressing the issue
- clear strategies and protocols for addressing racial harassment (including for example, third party reporting and so on) across all organisations, underpinned by a consistent system for recording, monitoring and evaluating racist incidents, which is used to inform action
- meaningful involvement of minority ethnic individuals or representatives throughout
- working with rural minority ethnic individuals and groups to increase their confidence in the system, by ensuring support throughout the process. A coordinated approach to case work and providing on going support and counselling to victims, thus helping them to develop confidence in the system, including measures to help people feel safe in their homes
- work with the majority communities to develop a better understanding of minority ethnic groups and to help change behaviour.

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### **Links and other references**

[The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry \(1999\) Report of An Enquiry, by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny](#)

[Central Scotland Race Equality Council](#)

[Grampian Race Equality Council](#)

[West of Scotland Racial Equality Council](#)

[Commission for Racial Equality \(July 2005\). Independent review into policing and race relations in Scotland](#)

[Racial Attacks and Harassment Multi-Agency Strategy \(Central Scotland\)](#)

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[\*Safety for minority ethnic groups in Aberdeenshire\*](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the discussion in this chapter draws from a range of research undertaken by the author since 1999 as well as from a Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) funded project Rural Racism: Mapping the Problem and Defining - Practical Policy Recommendations, which took the form of a rural mapping exercise on 'race' issues. The research was commissioned in 2001 and undertaken between 2001 and 2002 by the author and was submitted to the CRE in 2002.