

An Invisible Problem: 'Rural Racism' in Southeast Scotland

Brian Plastow MSc



Chief Superintendent with Fife Police and PhD Student - Department of Criminology, University of Leicester

In recent years, a growing body of academic research has recognised the distinct phenomenon of 'Rural Racism'. However, the specific dynamics of the problem in isolated areas is largely unknown outside of academia and as a consequence it has received little attention from those agencies charged with a 'General Duty' to promote effective race relations. In a Scottish rural context, this problem is compounded by a range of other variables including the flawed assumption that racism is not really a problem because of the tiny minority ethnic population. This groundbreaking research in Scotland challenges this assumption and reveals precisely why the problem is 'invisible' to policy makers.

BACKGROUND

The issue of racism in the United Kingdom has traditionally been conceived through an urban frame of reference and is commonly seen as problem of the inner City. However, a growing body of academic research now challenges this assumption.

This groundbreaking research explores the issue of rural racism from a uniquely Scottish context and represents the largest and most significant study ever conducted into the phenomenon of rural racism in Scotland. The research was aligned to a Fellowship from the National Policing Improvement Agency with unique and unrestricted access to police data and intelligence systems.

The research is set against the context of tensions within Scottish society and commenced in the period immediately following the election of the first nationalist government in Scotland following the election in May 2007 of the Scottish National Party.

The research explored public attitudes to discrimination and also sought to ascertain the true nature, extent and impact of the problem through the following research question:

'What is the nature and extent of racism experienced by visible ethnic minority residents in rural areas of Southeast Scotland and how does this impact on perceptions of community and safety?'

METHODOLOGY

- Public Attitudes Survey of 175 white residents over 5 local authority areas to assess attitudes to discrimination.
- 5 follow-up Focus Groups with white residents.
- Secondary quantitative analysis of all racial incidents reported to the police in the research area during 2007 (308 reports) including qualitative discourse analysis.
- Quality of Life Survey of visible ethnic minority residents (307 survey questionnaires) for quantitative and qualitative analysis
- Semi-structured interviews with 25 victims

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

• Nature, Extent and Impact of racist violence and harassment

The research has revealed a disturbing and multi-dimensional picture of racist violence and harassment in rural areas of Southeast Scotland with high levels of repeat victimisation. The nature of the problem is largely characterised by low level harassment with verbal abuse and aversive racisms being the most common. However, the research also uncovered numerous instances of violent racisms including violent assaults, stabbings, petrol bombs having been thrown at business premises and one case of an explosive substance having been used to target a visible ethnic minority business.

The impact of such everyday racisms has a profound and damaging impact on the psychological wellbeing of victims and impacts negatively on perceptions of community and safety. This is then further compounded by a lack of support networks for visible ethnic minority residents living in rural Southeast Scotland and the absence of a political voice due to the exclusive white landscape in political terms as none of the local authorities in the study area have ever had an elected member who was not white.

• The role of 'Agency' and 'State' – The problem is not on the 'Radar'

Despite a year-on-year increase in incidents of reported racist violence and harassment in rural areas of Scotland, the specific phenomenon of rural racism remains largely unknown outside of academia. To compound this, the research found clear evidence of a shift in emphasis in state and agency policy responses towards visible ethnic minority communities (particularly Muslim communities) as now constituting a 'Problem' that required to be 'controlled' in the post 7/7 era with an associated diminishing focus on the promotion of diversity and multiculturalism as 'Yesterdays News'. This is then compounded by numbers based environmental scanning methodologies which result in rural racism being 'invisible' due to the very small visible ethnic minority population as reported incidents simply do not register on the 'radar' of agencies such as the police.

• Attitudes of white rural residents

A key theme that emerged from the consultation with white rural residents was that they viewed the countryside somewhat idealistically as a 'crime-free' environment, where there was a strong sense of community spirit. Unfortunately, all too often racist, Anglophobic and xenophobic comments were evidenced in the interviews and focus groups, and victims frequently related how they were made to feel unwelcome or were ostracised as 'outsiders'.

CONCLUSIONS

• Understanding rural racism in Scotland

The research has uncovered a disturbing picture of racist violence and harassment in rural Southeast Scotland fuelled by hegemonic public attitudes where traditional rural dwellers view Scotland as a predominantly **white landscape** and are resistant to 'others' polluting their space. The research confirms racist harassment to be a persistent and harrowing 'fact of life' for many minority ethnic residents in the countryside. Incidents were often part of a wider pattern of racist harassment that could have damaging consequences for victims' physical and mental health. Being the only minority ethnic household in a village, coupled with a lack of social support networks that are evident in many cities, meant that victims often felt very much alone. Many white rural residents, however, did not see racism as a problem locally and indeed had very idealised views of their towns and villages that masked a more brutal reality.

• Improving agency responses

The research found that agencies were in essence 'blind' to the problem of racism in rural areas and solely equated the seriousness of a problem with how significantly it was reflected in official crime statistics. Therefore, the needs of victims of racism were overlooked due to the relatively small number of incidents in areas where populations are mainly white. However, the research concluded that unless agencies can go beyond this simplistic analysis and understand the severity of the problem then ethnic minority residents will continue to be marginalised by those with a 'General Duty' to promote effective race relations.

