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# The Hidden Truth: Racist Harassment in Northern Ireland

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Introduction

Previous research has shown that racist harassment is a significant part of life for many minority ethnic people living in Northern Ireland. Just under a half (44%) have experienced verbal abuse while just under a third (29%) have experienced criminal damage to their property and one in ten have actually been physically assaulted because of their racial identity.

This report aims to get beneath these overall figures to document minority ethnic people's experiences of racist harassment and the ways in which it effects their lives. It draws upon data from indepth interviews with 101 minority ethnic people from across Northern Ireland and drawn from the four largest groups in the region: Chinese, Travellers<sup>1</sup>, South Asians and Black Africans.

The report also attempts to gain a better understanding of the causes of racist harassment. In doing this it draws upon data from an attitudinal survey of 1267 people drawn randomly from across Northern Ireland together with data from nine indepth focus group discussions with members of the white, majority population.

The report is the third of four due to be published this year. The reports arise from a major research study into the nature and effects of racism in Northern Ireland conducted by the present authors, commissioned by the Inter-Departmental Social Steering Group and managed by the Equality Unit Research Branch within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

## Summary of Main Findings

The main findings to arise from the report are:

### ***Racist harassment in Northern Ireland***

- This report uses the definition of racist harassment proposed in the recent EU Race Directive that defines it as unwanted conduct related to racial or

ethnic origin that takes place with the purpose *or effect* of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

- This definition is purposely used to stress the many different forms that racist harassment can take, from overt and intentional acts of abuse to more subconscious and unintentional actions. With this in mind, a distinction is made between direct and indirect forms of racist harassment.

### ***Direct racist harassment***

- The report identified three principle forms of direct racist harassment experienced by minority ethnic people in the region: verbal abuse, criminal damage to property and physical abuse. What unites these differing activities is the motivation on the part of those involved to purposely violate the dignity of an individual because of their racial identity by acting in a hostile and intimidating manner towards them.
- The research has shown that such incidents are essentially unprovoked and random. They can occur at any time and in any specific context. Minority ethnic interviewees, for example, have reported being verbally and/or physically harassed while walking down the street, while shopping in the city centre, while at train stations, on the bus and while driving.
- In relation to racist name-calling, a further distinction is made between 'hot' and 'cold' verbal abuse. Cold name-calling reflects a 'cold' and calculated desire on the part of the perpetrator to intentionally harass someone because of their racial identity. In contrast, 'hot' name-calling is more likely to occur at the 'heat of the moment', often when the perpetrator feels challenged and/or vulnerable themselves.
- Such a distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' racist name-calling is not meant to imply that one is any less serious than the other in terms of its impact upon minority ethnic people. Rather, it is to illustrate the fact that people will tend to engage in racist abuse for different reasons. In the case of 'hot' name-calling, the use of racist abuse may not therefore represent an initial intention to harass others.
- Overall, the fact that direct racist harassment can occur anywhere and at any time can only result in a tendency for minority ethnic people to generally feel vulnerable and victimised within this society. That such forms of harassment can occur in extremely public and open places, largely without any intervention from those around, tends to underline minority ethnic people's sense of social exclusion and their position as second-class citizens.

### ***Indirect racist harassment***

- Within this overall context of relatively routine incidents of direct racist harassment, the report argues that there is a need to recognise the

existence of an additional set of processes that tend to feed into and reinforce the violation of dignity experienced by many minority ethnic people. However, as opposed to direct racist harassment, these processes are distinguished by the fact that they are more likely to be subconscious and covert and where the racial motivation is either in doubt or completely unintentional.

- It is argued in the report that such forms of indirect racist harassment as it has been termed can take on a variety of different forms. Four particular forms are highlighted in the report as an illustration. The first has been termed **racial distancing** and represents those social occasions where minority ethnic people feel that those around them cannot see past their racial identity. It can often be reflected in prolonged stares, silences and/or avoiding behaviours. While such actions may well simply reflect an awkwardness and/or curiosity on the part of those involved, its effects are nevertheless to contribute to an intimidating and at times hostile environment for many minority ethnic people.
- A second form of indirect racist harassment is **benign ignorance**. This can often occur between white, settled people and their minority ethnic colleagues and/or acquaintances. It represents often well-meaning comments that are intended to encourage conversation but which, often unintentionally, betray an ignorance about the culture and/or lifestyle of the minority ethnic person involved. Again, such actions tend to make minority ethnic people feel degraded and/or humiliated in terms of their racial identity.
- A third form of indirect racist harassment identified in the report is **racist bantering**. Many of the white, settled interviewees were at pains to stress the 'friendly' nature of banter (or 'slagging' as it is also called) and how its use tends to reflect an acceptance of the person subject to it. However, the report shows that there is in reality very little distinction between 'friendly' racial banter and racist abuse.
- For the most part, minority ethnic people do not tend to perceive such racial jokes and 'slagging' as good humoured. Moreover, the data suggest that the underlying motivations of those involved is also highly questionable. The report argues for the need for racist bantering to be regarded as unacceptable and as a special form of bantering that is ultimately offensive and that should not be tolerated.
- The final form of indirect racist harassment highlighted in the report has been termed **deracialised harassment**. It represents those instances where certain minority ethnic groups feel that they are disproportionately targeted for certain anti-social and/or criminal activity even though the motivations of those involved are unclear and/or where 'race' is not explicitly mentioned. Examples of such could include the perception among the Chinese community that they are more likely to be the victims of robberies because they are regarded as a 'soft target'.

- Overall, while a number of different examples of indirect racist harassment have been outlined and discussed in the report, what tends to unite them is the way they can contribute to the violation of minority ethnic people's dignity through creating and/or reinforcing an environment that is intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating and/or offensive.
- While some of the examples discussed may not appear to be as serious and/or important compared to the more direct incidents of verbal and physical assault, it is their *cumulative* and long-term effects that are important. Taken together, the many different forms of direct and indirect racist harassment combine in a powerful way to underwrite minority ethnic people's sense of vulnerability and victimisation and thus ensure that many live a life of apprehension, if not fear.

### ***Minority ethnic people's responses to racist harassment***

- In exploring some of the consequences of racist harassment on the lives of minority ethnic people, the report identifies four core responses that they tend to adopt. The first is **toleration** whereby minority ethnic people attempt to either ignore or downplay the significance of the harassment they experience.
- A second, and much less common response is **retaliation**. In this case, minority ethnic people would attempt to challenge those who have verbally or physically abused them. As some of the incidents discussed in the report show, however, this is often a dangerous strategy and one that can lead to more serious physical assault.
- A third response is to **report the incident** either to the school (in the case of children in education) or to the police. However, the data suggest that the responses received by those who have chosen to report the incident can vary enormously, particularly in relation to individual schools, indicating a lack of consistency of practice.
- Finally, a common response to racist harassment among minority ethnic people is **avoidance** - the tendency to try to avoid it altogether. This often means avoiding walking through certain areas or visiting certain social settings. While an understandable response, it is one that is of concern given the fact that it may lead to minority ethnic people feeling unable to access a range of facilities and services for fear of harassment.

### ***The perpetrators of racist harassment***

- The report also examines the evidence to ascertain the characteristics of those most likely to engage in racist harassment. In relation to direct racist harassment, the report identified two key social groupings: groups of children, especially boys, aged 10-17; and groups of young males aged 18-35. While both are likely to engage in verbal abuse, the former is more likely to harass minority ethnic people in the street and throw objects at

them and the latter is more likely to commit more serious acts of physical assault.

- In terms of indirect racist harassment, the characteristics of the perpetrators would appear to be less easily identifiable and more likely to occur in any social grouping. However, within this, there does seem to be a tendency for younger people to be involved in racist bantering and older people in the process of racial distancing.
- Overall, however, the report stresses that these are only broad tendencies that have been identified. The data suggests that any form of racist harassment – whether direct or indirect – can take place within any social grouping.

### ***Racist harassment and male sub-cultures***

- The report also examines some of the key elements of the sub-cultures of boys and young men that can help to explain why these particular groups are more likely to perpetrate acts of direct racist harassment. It is argued that racist harassment is not something additional to their social worlds but is, rather, simply a logical extension of their general attitudes and behaviour.
- More specifically, it would seem that boys and young men tend to draw upon 'race' as a resource to use within their general competitive, bantering and aggressive behaviour. In other words, racial prejudice provides the context within which boys and young men tend to target their aggressive and intimidatory behaviour at minority ethnic people.

### ***Attitudes underpinning indirect racist harassment***

- It is much more difficult to draw any firm conclusions regarding the attitudes that tend to underpin indirect racist harassment given its diverse nature and forms. However, it would certainly seem that in terms of racial distancing, much of this behaviour would appear to stem simply from a lack of understanding and/or a well-meaning attitude.
- However, it is interesting to note that some of the key attitudes that underpin the more subtle and indirect forms of racist harassment are very similar to those underpinning the direct racist harassment perpetrated predominantly by boys and young men. At its most basic level, this was found to be based upon some notion of territory and a feeling that minority ethnic people represented a threat to that territory.
- It is suggested in the report that while the forms that direct and indirect racist harassment take may be very different, they do therefore tend to be based upon a very similar core set of attitudes and beliefs. In other words, the attitudes that influence the actions of those who verbally or physically attack minority ethnic people are actually little different in principle from those that influence the more subconscious and subtle processes of racial

distancing such as staring at and/or avoiding minority ethnic people in public.

## Recommendations

In considering the implications of these findings for developing strategies to address racist harassment, the report makes a number of recommendations:

### ***Direct Racist Harassment***

1. All employers and service providers, whether public or private, should develop a clear and explicit strategy for dealing with incidents of racist harassment that occur within their areas of responsibility.

Such a strategy should:

- publicise the policy, making it clear to all concerned what racist harassment is and thus what is regarded as unacceptable behaviour;
- set out the consequences for those who engage in such behaviour in relation to disciplinary procedures and/or the application of sanctions where applicable; and
- include effective mechanisms for offering guidance and support to those subject to racist harassment.

In the absence of a broader guide on racist harassment (see Recommendation 2 below), organisations and institutions are advised to consult the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's *Racial Harassment at Work: What Employers Can Do About It* (2000) to help inform the overall development of such strategies.

2. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland should produce a general guide on combating racist harassment of relevance to a wide range of organisations, institutions and agencies within both the statutory and voluntary sectors as well as social and community groups. The guide should:
  - Offer a clear outline of what racist harassment is and the serious effects it has on the lives of minority ethnic people;
  - Set out general principles that should guide the development of policies to combat racist harassment; and
  - Identify a number of case studies, representing differing organisations and settings, and provide more practical and specific guidance on how racist harassment might best be addressed in relation to these.

3. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), in conjunction with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland should consult with minority ethnic organisations to identify what needs currently exist in relation to offering confidential and independent advice and support to those who are subject to racist harassment.

The OFMDFM and the Equality Commission should ensure that they develop a co-ordinated and strategic approach to providing sufficient core funding to help support and develop existing services offered through minority ethnic organisations to meet the need that exists.

Alongside supporting direct services, funding should also be made available to enable such organisations to play a more strategic role in effectively monitoring developments and making proposals, where necessary, regarding further changes and improvements to the services that do exist.

### ***Indirect Racist Harassment***

4. An intercultural dimension should run throughout the Northern Ireland Curriculum to increase pupils' awareness of racism and to develop their understanding of and respect for cultural diversity. To facilitate this, it is recommended that the CCEA should:

- Ensure that intercultural education is given due prominence in the new Northern Ireland Curriculum that is currently being developed through the curriculum review; and
- Develop further and carefully pilot a comprehensive set of intercultural resources for teachers to use across the range of subjects and within all four key stages.

5. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland should take responsibility for facilitating, co-ordinating and monitoring a broader educational strategy aimed at reducing racial prejudice and promoting good race relations in the region. While including a focus on the diverse range of minority ethnic groups that exist, a particular emphasis should be placed on Travellers.

The Commission should consider including the following within such a strategy:

- A Specific media campaign (including television and radio adverts, posters and leaflets); and
- The production of training resources for use by youth and community groups.

6. As part of the broader educational strategy recommended above (see Recommendation 5), the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

should include a specific focus on racist banter. Such a focus should aim to highlight the negative effects of racist bantering and to encourage people to regard it as an activity that is unacceptable and should not be tolerated in any form. Initially, the campaign should be targeted at younger people but should be broad enough to appeal to the population as a whole.

7. The RUC should undertake and/or commission research to ascertain the extent of the problem with regard to what has been identified in this report as the 'deracialised harassment' of minority ethnic people. More specifically, this could include a comparative study to identify whether minority ethnic businesses (especially in catering and retail) tend to be the targets of greater levels of criminal behaviour and activity than other similar businesses within the majority, white population. The findings of the research should provide the basis for the RUC to work closely with the minority ethnic communities involved to develop effective structures and strategies to deal with the criminal activity they experience.

### ***Community work with boys and young men***

8. The Department of Education, in conjunction with the Youth Service, should review existing initiatives being undertaken with boys and young men. Such a review should form the basis from which a more coordinated strategy is developed in relation to addressing the violent and negative sub-cultures that can exist among boys and young men.

While the strategy should be broad-based, it should include specific work on racism and racist harassment.

### ***Inter-agency forum on racist harassment***

9. The Government should establish an inter-agency forum with the aim of driving forward a co-ordinated strategy to tackle racist harassment in Northern Ireland. The lead department/agency to take overall responsibility for the forum should be a matter for the Government to decide.

The forum should comprise representatives from all appropriate government departments, agencies and other relevant organisations. It should also include representatives from the main minority ethnic organisations and communities in the region.

Among its key responsibilities, the forum should:

- Facilitate effective communication and inter-agency working among those departments, agencies and organisations represented;
- establish effective mechanisms centrally for recording and monitoring incidents of racist harassment in Northern Ireland; and

- ensure that appropriate mechanisms are developed for encouraging individuals to report incidents of racist harassment as well as offering them effective support when they do.

## **Note**

- 1 For convenience, the term 'Travellers' is used throughout this report to refer to people identified as 'Irish Travellers' in the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997. The Order defines such people as: 'a community of people ... who are identified (both by themselves and by others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland'.

## **Copies of the report**

Copies of the full report can be obtained from the:

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency  
Corporate Branch  
McAuley House  
2-14 Castle Street  
Belfast  
BT1 1SA

Tel. (028) 9034 8100

Cheques for £10.00 (including postage and packaging within the UK) should be crossed and made payable to the Department of Personnel and Finance.

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