Perpetrators of Racist Violence and Harassment
Executive Summary

A Runnymede Research Report by Omar Khan
Executive Summary

In surveying the literature on perpetrators of racist violence and harassment, it soon becomes apparent that there is much scope for further research projects in the UK. Furthermore, guidance for probation officers, community organisations and individuals is not extensive and there is a clear need for best practice handbooks for those working in this difficult and sensitive field. However, there is significant material in related fields, and a review of a small sampling of this literature illuminates some of the concerns that need to be addressed in the area. But before addressing the specific research on working with perpetrators of racial violence and harassment in the UK, a brief overview of related literature will help place the issue in an appropriate and forward-looking context. This report is therefore divided into three text sections, with Section IV containing the case study appendices and Section V being the Bibliography.

Section I
The first section deals with the broader topics informing the issue of perpetrators of racial violence including chapters on:

1. sociological and social psychological literature on prejudice;
2. issues in criminology such as delinquency, and
3. a shorter review of youth cultures and cultures of masculinities.

Much of this literature is theoretical in nature and an overview of these topics will set the stage for the second section, dealing more specifically with perpetrators of racist violence and harassment.

The first two chapters form the bulk of the analysis, in keeping with the notion that perpetrators of racial violence and harassment can be treated in two ways. The first chapter attempts to address prejudice in society and eliminate its appearance, which in turn will limit the numbers of perpetrators. This approach seeks to undermine and eventually destroy the breeding ground for ideas of racial superiority that so often inform offender behaviour. The second chapter addresses the school of thought that criminal behaviour is the true source of all forms of violence, with racist violence merely a subset of a larger tendency. In this case, understanding the roots of criminal behaviour will help identify perpetrators. Policies aimed at reducing the level of criminality will also reduce the prevalence of specifically racialised violence.

Section II
Section II turns to the UK situation specifically. A review of the general history of minority ethnic communities in Britain, especially the range of difficulties faced as 20th-century immigrants and the level of ill-treatment suffered, which constitutes the first chapter of the section. This emphasis is not meant to suggest that such treatment is the only or indeed the dominant experience for members of minority ethnic communities in relation to British
society, but it is a significant one with long roots – over 1000 years of them – that affected most black and minority ethnic Britons long before the situation was officially recognised.

In understanding and at times confronting the perpetrators of racist violence and harassment, the origins of the black British experience should not be forgotten. Recent and contemporary policy formulation by central government precedes the discussion on perpetrators of racist violence. There are different areas of focus in working with perpetrators and Runnymede (and any other organisation) will have to decide which area can be test targeted and which area is in most need of further development.

Section II also attempts to meld the somewhat diverse issues of Section I into the topic area of working with perpetrators of racist violence and harassment. Although the literature on this topic is fairly small, the issues involved are highly complex. In addition, it is clear that a single institutional response would necessarily fail to bring about positive change in the next generation. This means that a wide range of bodies and individuals will need to be involved together, in what has been referred to as a “multi-agency” response.

Section III
Section III offers some preliminary findings and makes recommendations for further work. As stated above, future development will crucially depend on the aims and goals of the project. In particular, Rae Sibbitt’s three-part typology of individual perpetrators, potential perpetrators, and the perpetrator community suggests at least three different target groups for future action. Not only will each group require different strategies, but any methodology that fails to capture the importance of addressing the communities surrounding perpetrators will miss the crucial opportunity to prevent potential perpetrator groups from forming in the next generation.

This report does not advocate specific ways of approaching a future project for working with perpetrators but offers a background understanding that will suggest the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches as well as the assumptions that lie behind such projects.

Next Steps
Following on from the report’s recommendations, Runnymede is undertaking a new action research project.

To date, very little work has been conducted on the origins and/or prevention of racially motivated crime, both of which are issues of great importance especially in light of the recent violent eruptions in the North West of England. Victims of racist violence bring out in all of us justified feelings of sympathy and anger therefore it is not surprising that most of the research, and the project activity, is around victims. The perpetrators provoke feelings of horror and fear. Perhaps it is inevitable that researchers and care professionals are drawn more to the problems of victims than of perpetrators.

Of the research and practice-orientated work already in existence on preventing racist crime and violence, most deals with known perpetrators. But if, as is widely accepted, only 2–3% of perpetrators are ever caught by the criminal justice system, most of them remain
unknown. And with much less focus on primary prevention – that is, preventing racist violence before it happens – communities are short of guidance on how to make effective interventions in dealing with potential perpetrators and the wider community of offenders. Lack of practical experience in this area also leaves government without the necessary evidence and perhaps even the impetus to create policy for local and national action against potential racist violence.

Action research is therefore required. Already several community-based projects have taken a primary prevention perspective and attempted to address the problem of potentially racist violence and harassment as well as working with known perpetrators. But these seem to be isolated projects, without the kind of sustained funding necessary to continue and develop their work over time. Yet, these voluntary organisations and actions have a most important role to play. Mapping recent and current local projects can form the basis of guidance for future action and government policy to support local initiatives. Information exchange and sharing will prove vital to the success of future projects and work.

Runnymede proposes to take on this issue by conducting a mapping exercise of existing projects and good practice and developing and co-ordinating a forum for crime and ‘race’ experts to engage in productive research and dialogue, in order to develop new approaches for tackling racially motivated crime. The specific structure and outcomes of the project are described in the sections that follow. The project is scheduled to last 16 months.

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Runnymede is a prominent, independent research and policy agency on ethnicity and cultural diversity, with a long track record in leading edge research, working in close collaboration with business, leading thinkers and policy makers. Founded in 1968 as a Charitable Educational Trust, our mandate is to promote a successful multi-ethnic Britain -- a Britain where citizens and communities feel valued, enjoy equal opportunities to develop their talents, lead fulfilling lives and accept collective responsibility, all in the spirit of civic friendship, shared identity and a common sense of belonging.
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