

3. Disadvantage and Social Structure

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In this short chapter I want to suggest that we now know enough about crime and about race to begin to say some things about how the two are related. It has only been possible to realize some of these things in very recent years. This is because it has only been in very recent years that our social structures have changed themselves to reveal their workings. Now that we are rich enough, if we averaged out our wealth, to meet all our needs, and now that even the poor mostly no longer go hungry, people no longer steal to buy food. Today there are wide variations between levels of activity deemed criminal in different affluent countries because of the varying social inequalities in those rich countries (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

What has been viewed as a crime has always depended on what has been seen as criminal at different times and in different places and what action it is then deemed appropriate to take. How different activity has come to be viewed as criminal in Britain in very recent centuries and what is then done to those said to be criminals has changed in a way that can only be described as staggering when viewed dispassionately (Throness, 2008).

It is vital to step back and try to dismiss a little of the passion you might feel about contemporary criminal activity to better understand why we have the criminal justice system we currently have; why there is overrepresentation of certain groups within it, especially older boys and young men; and why disadvantage and the social structure are so key in determining which of those people are most criminalized.

We know that the level of crime we experience is, in the majority of cases, the product of the way in which the society within which we live is organized. I'll give a practical example: When I was a teenager, in the early 1980s, there were many burglaries. Many of these were to steal video recorders, and in some cases newer kinds of television. These and other expensive goods had recently become mass consumer items. They could be sold in pubs and elsewhere, 'second-hand'. They were valuable, but because some people in the early-1980s had recently become much more affluent, while others had not, brand new TVs and videos were out of the financial reach

of many families. Back then many people still rented a TV – I remember renting one as a student. It was normal to rent; owning a large TV was then a sign of affluence. Social norms really do change very quickly.

In my parents' day, when they were young in the 1960s, the distribution of incomes in Britain between households was far more equal. Most people had a radio, few had a television, and no video recorders existed. Crime levels were much lower, burglary was far rarer. Even the murder rate was half what it is today (Figure 1). Perhaps people were better behaved? Perhaps standards have been slipping since the war ended and so the 1980s were just much worse than the 1960s because of that?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, although the violent crime and murder rate rose, the burglary rate fell again. Nobody wanted to burgle video tape players any more, they were becoming museum pieces. TVs became so large and so cheap it was far more effort than it was worth to steal them. You could soon buy a brand new DVD player from a supermarket for just under £20. Why risk buying one 'second hand' that had no guarantee?

Inequalities in income were just as high in the first decade of the current century as they were in the 1980s, if not higher, but what we had in our homes had changed, the structure of our society had changed in a way which made some kinds of crime less sensible to commit. Instead it became much more sensible to shop lift, which is why CDs are electronically tagged or don't have the disc in the package today, and why coffee is to be found behind the counter in some shops. We don't worry so much about the CD player in our homes.

People do not change much. Instead the circumstances they are born into change rapidly generation on generation. In those countries in which inequalities in income and wealth are low, and in which temptation is not endlessly paraded – goods are not advertised as 'essentials' and position is not lauded as success – here, crime rates tend to be lower (Figure 2 on page 14). It is much harder to become dangerously drunk and violent in a place where the alcohol is very

expensive. It is much easier to feel violent towards others living in a place where many people are ranked widely apart and you are not supposed to look other men in the eye for fear that your glance is interpreted as a challenge.

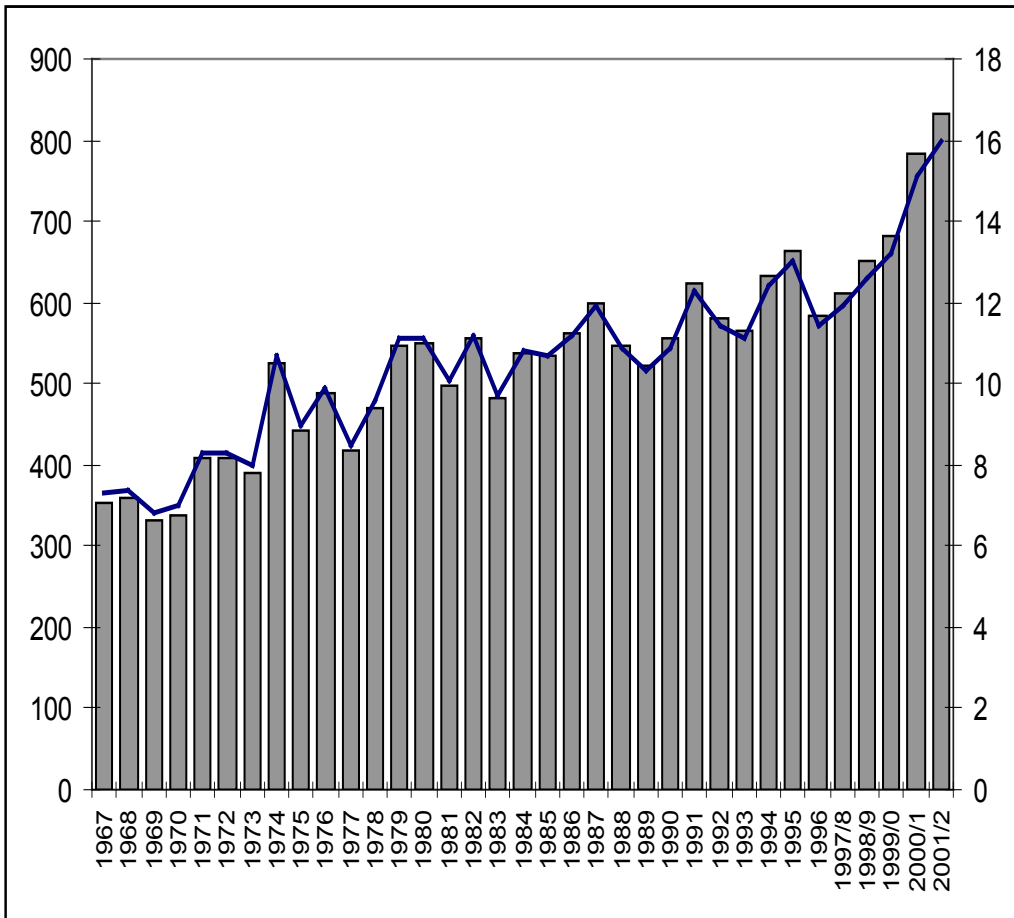
Many crimes are only possible because of the place you live in. Not many years ago the most common crime that resulted, eventually, in women in Britain being imprisoned was non-payment of TV licenses, being rewarded with a fine, which was itself often not paid and so a prison sentence was imposed. If we did not have a flat "poll tax" TV licence in Britain this criminalization would not be possible. If the BBC were paid from taxation no one would be in prison for not paying their TV licence. We have recently learnt, as the BBC has grovelled to the new coalition in fear of being further privatized, that the licence fee is no protection from political interference. It is simply a way to make the poor pay a far high proportion of their meagre

incomes and benefits for what has become a universal expectation: television.

A huge number of activities which were legal when I was a child have now been reclassified as crimes. In particular what is now often termed 'anti-social behaviour' has been criminalized which results in far more young people becoming criminals, gaining a conviction, a 'record', and then having much less to lose from carrying on behaving badly, often almost being expected to. In more sensible societies in more sensible times far fewer things are labelled a crime to be dealt with by the formal criminal justice system.

In Nordic countries the equivalent of the Home Secretaries of Britain sign for all of the handful of children who are kept imprisoned each week. In Japan they have the fewest prison places of anywhere in the rich world, much more than ten times less than in Britain. What Japan and the Nordic

Figure 1. Offences recorded as homicide in England and Wales 1967-2001



Notes: Number of homicides per year as bars, scale on the left hand axis; rate per million people as line, scale on the right.

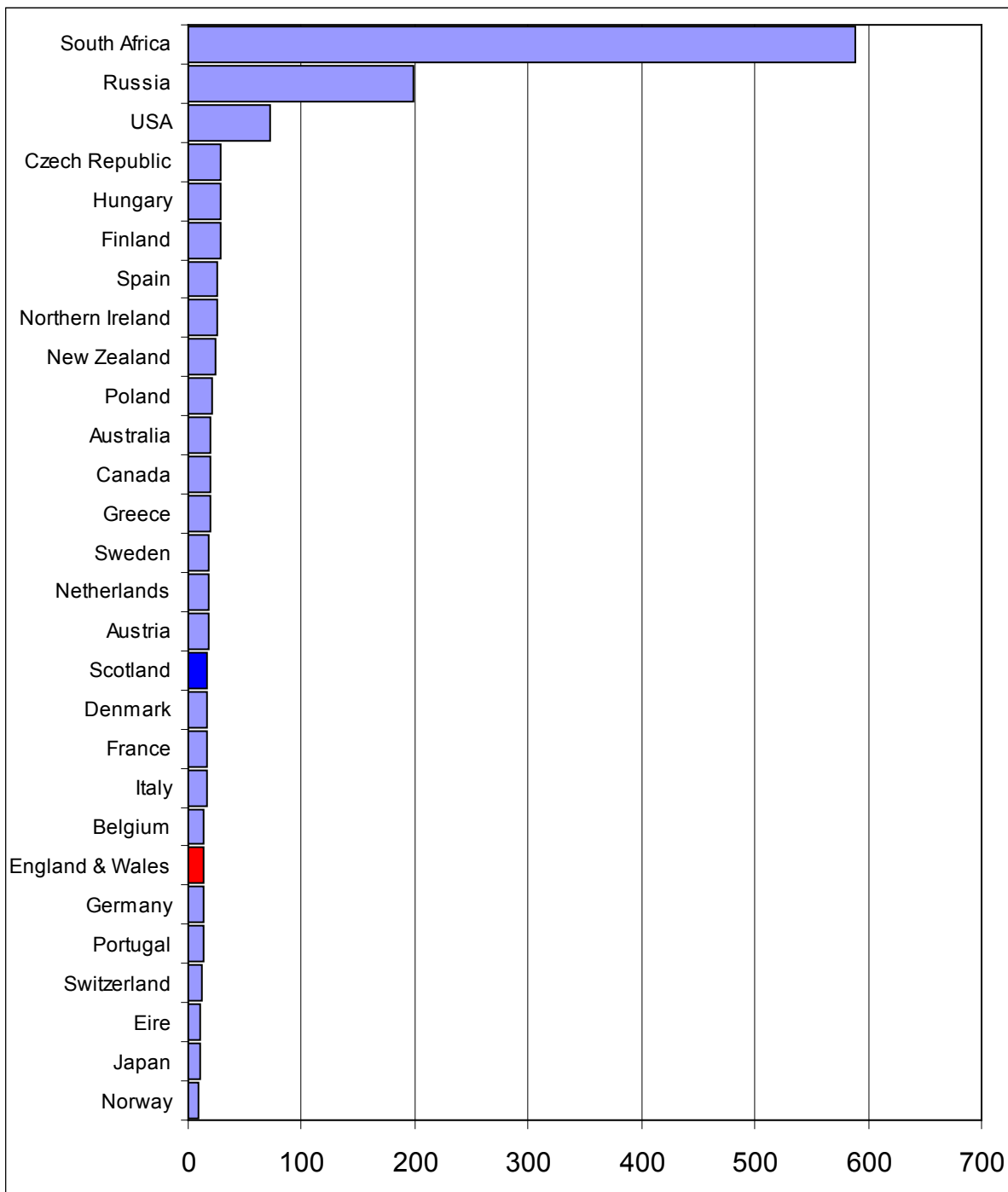
Source: Table 1.01 in Flood-Page and Taylor (2003)

countries have most in common is low inequalities in income and wealth between households.

In the UK we have the most prisoners per head of anywhere in Europe and tens of thousands of older teenagers are locked up, including more children being imprisoned than anywhere else in Europe. As I write (in November 2010) we still detain children for the crime of having been born

to someone whose immigration papers are not in order. The only large rich country with a worse criminal justice system than Britain's is the USA. In the USA more people are incarcerated than anywhere else in the world apart from the figures recently for Rwanda just after the genocide, and Rwanda surpassed the USA only when all those suspected of being involved and being held on remand were included.

Figure 2. Homicides rates per million, 1997



Source: Richards (1999)

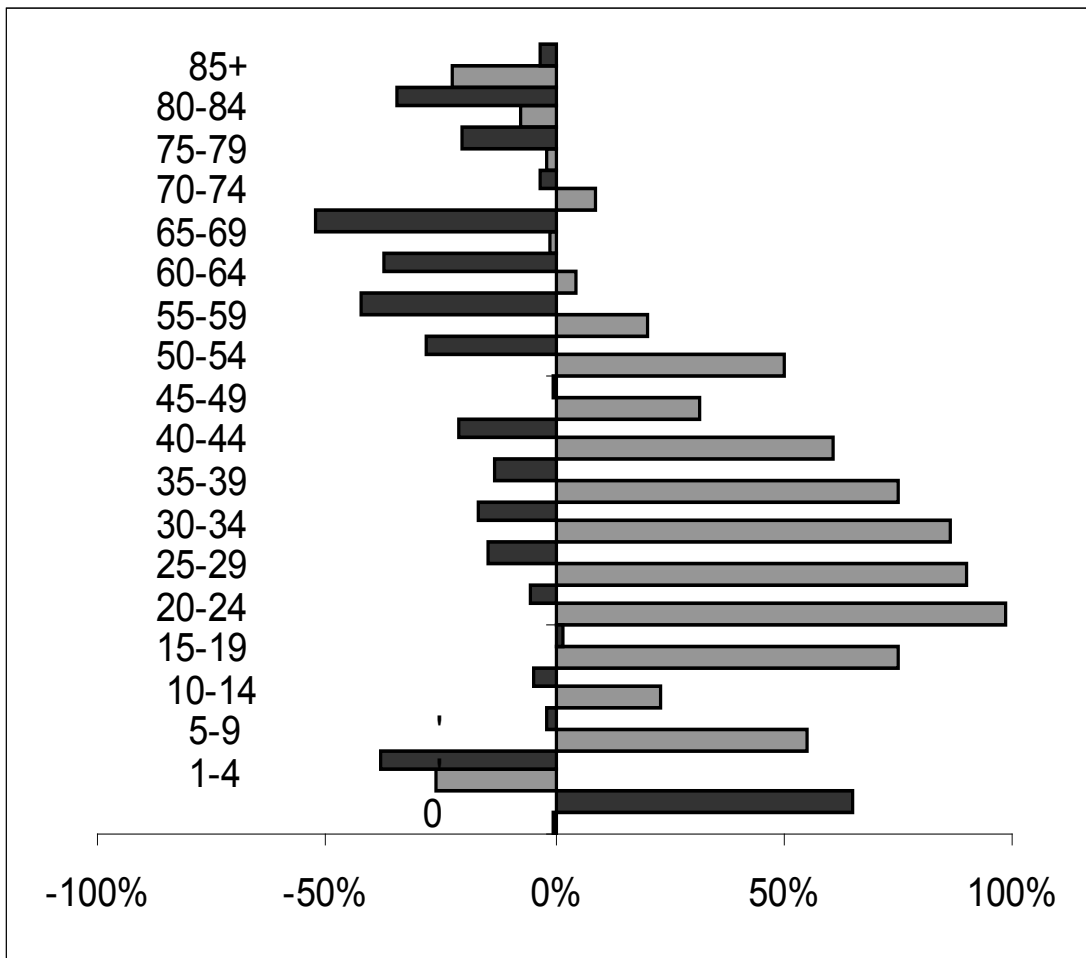
We choose how much crime we suffer. The USA can only afford to lock so many people up because it is such a wealthy country. Locking human beings up is expensive. Living with a high rate of crime is very expensive, but it is the price you have to pay if you choose to allow some people to be much wealthier than others and they in turn much wealthier than those below them and expect all to obey the same laws. Few people choose to become criminals. For common crimes, for most people in the world who have been given a criminal conviction, a key determinant of their likelihood of carrying out the act in the first place was when and where they were born, then their age and gender, and only then their own decisions.

Even for the most uncommon crime of all, murder, wider circumstances are crucial. Although the murder rate of people in Britain doubled over the period 1960 to the year 2000, it simultaneously halved for one group in the population: women (see Figure 3). Women began in growing numbers

to walk out of relationships that had become violent. They did not just do this because women in general had become more confident and aware; they did it because there was an increasing number of places, jobs, houses, and a greater air of acceptance to walk out to. The social structure had changed, not least because some groups of women had changed it.

The overall murder rate doubled despite the rate for women halving because the rate had always been much higher for young men being victims and because for them rates rose so quickly over this same period. However, for most men in most areas rates of murder also fell (see Table 1 on page 16). Young men growing up in particular areas were born into a situation in 1980 that was so unlike that which their parents had been born into in 1960 that their chances of being a victim of murder rose extremely quickly. The key date to avoid being born after was 1965 (if you had the power of forethought as a foetus) and the key

Figure 3. Change in murder rate by age and sex in Britain, 1981–1985 to 1996–2000



Notes: Light grey bars are for men, dark grey for women
 Source: Shaw et al., 2005

Table 1. Standardized Mortality Ratios (SMR) for murder by area by poverty in Britain

Breadline Britain poverty decile	1981-85	1986-90	1991-95	1996-2000	Change in SMR 1981-85 to 1996-2000	% Change in SMR 1981-1985
1 - Least poor	54	59	55	50	-4	-7.4
2	67	65	67	60	-7	-10.4
3	62	69	68	66	+4	+6.5
4	74	85	72	81	+7	+9.5
5	79	77	83	88	+9	+11.4
6	95	95	95	103	+8	+8.4
7	112	122	125	130	+18	+16.1
8	119	130	148	147	+28	+23.5
9	151	166	191	185	+34	+22.5
10 - poorest	243	261	271	282	+39	+16.0
Ratio 10:1	4.50	4.42	4.89	5.68		

Note: Expected values are based on 1981-85 national rates

Source: Shaw et al., 2005

place not to be born then was in an inner city, and then, and mainly then, the key things was not to be born male, and then, finally, not to be born black. Similar, but more extreme patterns occurred in the United States. The dramatic version of these statistical truisms is the HBO TV series *The Wire*.

We know that the way in which we are treated by race is, in the majority of cases, the product of the way in which the society in which we live is organized. At different times in different places, people who are otherwise the same are treated very differently simply because of the race they are said to belong to. In the year in which my parents were born millions of Jewish people were exterminated in Europe. Being Jewish became a crime.

When I was young, in the 1980s, much crime was blamed on people who were then called 'West Indian' and whose children are now often called of 'Afro-Caribbean descent'. The parents of the young West Indian adults had, in many cases, arrived in the 1960s from the West Indies and were amongst the most law-abiding of British citizens. It only took a generation for their position to reverse because of the places into which they arrived and how the times were allowed to change those places in Britain.

Perhaps the most striking conclusion is the persistence of substantial ethnic penalties for migrants and their descendants, both men and women, of Black African, Black Caribbean,

Pakistani and Bangladeshi ancestry. In contrast the White Irish, White Other and Chinese groups experienced little in the way of ethnic penalties (and little change over time). The Indians fell in between, although generally with rather modest disadvantages compared to their White British peers. It is particularly noticeable that, for the three main disadvantaged groups, there was no sign whatsoever of inter-generational improvement nor of any progress across historical time. In the case of life-cycle processes we even found rather surprising but compelling evidence of 'falling behind' rather than catching up for the first generation men. (Heath and Li, 2008: 301)

In different situations a person of the same race becomes very differently treated. On a university campus, where someone of South Asian heritage is at least six times more likely to be studying medicine than someone who is white, what might matter most is that two people are students, but a lecturer might make the assumption that an Asian student is more likely to be a 'medic' than a white student. A mile away, in the Crown Court complex of the city in which the university sits, the majority of the ten occupied docks may hold an accused who is Asian, while all 120 jurors are white. This is what I recently saw in the city I live in.

In Sheffield, your chances of being accused of a crime depend mostly on where you live, then being young and male and then on your race. People across all of South Yorkshire commit a huge

number of crimes everyday. The most common of these are also among the most potentially deadly – speeding – but these are the least prosecuted crimes of all. To be accused, charged, and end up in the dock and then convicted of a crime is much harder for someone who is white in Sheffield than it is for someone who is black or Asian. The differences in the probabilities are so extreme that you come to expect to see a young male non-white adult in the dock in most criminal cases today around where I live, despite the county of South Yorkshire being predominantly white.

In contrast to how the accused are selected from such a narrow band of society, jurors are selected at random from across most of south Yorkshire to sit in judgement at Sheffield Crown court. Although a third of babies now born in Sheffield are not white, South Yorkshire can be seen to be largely white either by consulting the census or by looking at who sits in jury boxes. The majority that are on the electoral roll and so in the jury lottery are even more likely to be white than are most adults, and so one race tends to sit in judgement on another, while receiving medical treatment often from another. All this is very different from two decades ago and will be very different age in two decades time, but in some ways it can be very similar.

Over time which groups are seen as minority and who is included in the majority alters to keep the majority a majority and keep the minority small enough to be considered a minority. However, at different times and in different places, society is more inclusive while at other times and in other parts of the world it is more exclusive. When we chose and fought for our society to be more inclusive we then tended to label fewer people as criminal, we labelled fewer activities as criminal and fewer people were driven to crime for the reasons they are driven to it today, and also we then tended not to so keenly assign people to racial groups.

To know whether people are being assigned keenly to racial groups and whether such an assignment is having a detrimental effect on them, the simplest statistical test is to compare the life expectancies of different racial groups living in an area. If those life expectancies differ then biological and social 'insults' have to have been occurring at the group level in a manner systematic enough to result in that outcome.

A recent definition of racism proposed by geographer Ruthie Gilmore is that 'racism is any

act that ultimately results in the premature deaths of groups of others'. This definition causes some consternation when it is proposed, but it is a useful definition because it makes it so hard to excuse an act that it is aimed at harming a particular social group of people as not being in some way racist.

All kinds of acts result in the premature deaths of others but when there is something systematic in how a group is overrepresented in their selection for such insults then you know that a particular group has been selected as a racial group. Being imprisoned is harmful to your health. If some racial groups are more likely than others to be imprisoned then that act of imprisonment, because it will hasten the premature deaths of people from some racial groups as a whole, is racist.

Where there is no or little difference between the life expectancy of different groups, then those groups are likely not to be very different, and racism is far rarer. Areas of Britain with widely varying life expectancies tend to include people of widely different social groups who are treated very differently as groups because of to whom they were born. Many who suffer most badly are white and poor, but a very high proportion of people from particular racial groups in Britain live in areas and belong to social classes where they are likely to live much shorter lives than others.

In countries which have very low inequalities in health, and in all these cases also in wealth, there are always far fewer distinctions made between racial groups. Should you look closely enough and feel the inclination to delineate, you will find racial groups everywhere, but what inclination would you have to delineate where there were fewer differences in the distribution of resources to worry about in the first place? It is gross inequalities in income and wealth that keep particular castes and races important markers of disadvantage for far longer in some places than others.

When groups of people live together for some time under conditions of greater social equality they stop seeing racial differences between them and may even come to view themselves as a homogeneous race and then can view outsiders as quite different.

Outsiders from more unequal nations tend to be different regardless of their race. This homogeneity does not result in greater equality; it is a result of it. In all the cases that we know of, from recently aristocratic Japan, to formally Celtic slave-holding

Iceland, not too long ago the people with almost identical genes to those there today lived in different racial groups. These may have been called different 'households' or 'families'.

In Britain, as inequalities between neighbourhoods and social classes grew in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, racism rose again. Most obviously initially in the burst of anger that came with the National Front, and then in the far nastier and more widely brutal racism of Mrs Thatcher's beliefs of the needs of the 'British people':

... people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.... we must hold out the clear prospect of an end to immigration because at the moment it is about between 45,000 and 50,000 people coming in a year. Now, I was brought up in a small town, 25,000. That would be two new towns a year and that is quite a lot. So, we do have to hold out the prospect of an end to immigration except, of course, for compassionate cases. (Thatcher, 1978)

In the 1980s there were riots that involved a majority of white youths in most cases, fighting the white police. These were labelled race riots because a high proportion of the young people in the inner city areas which rioted were black. In the 1990s racism became more institutionalized, systematic and in many ways was uncommented upon as social divisions resulted in racial divisions by occupation – seen now in terms of who most often provides 'security' at the doors of buildings in London, cleans those buildings at night and runs the trains to get mostly white folk to those buildings in the morning. In the last decade this kind of hidden systematized institutionalized racism began to be questioned again, but when social inequalities rise in general other divisions cannot at all easily be reduced.

Growing social inequality makes people look for differences with strangers. It makes appearing physically different to others more important. Far more assumptions are likely to be made about someone from the colour of their skin in a society with wide and widening income and wealth inequalities. Fear of others grows and more people are labelled as being different. What's more - people more often say stupid and rude things as

inequalities rise, such as 'Rudeness is just as bad as racism' (David Cameron, 2007).

Almost no one likes to be called a racist any more in Britain, but any number of fine words about how we came to construct crime and reinforce race is of little comfort when some lads of another group (to you) ask you the time and when you look down at your watch the next thing you see is a fist in your face. It is easier to steal from people who you think see you as different, and who often do see you in that way. It is easier to blame people who you see as different, and often they are because you make them different. It is much harder to sustain high levels of crime and to see others as being of very different racial groups in those societies and at those times in which the economic difference between ourselves are so much less.

Along the street where I live today almost every home has a burglar alarm. Most of these are defunct. From their appearance it can be seen that they were put up in the 1980s, during that last period when inequalities rose abruptly, society dislocated, swastikas were a common part of the graffiti and property crime soared.

Not far from the street where I live today people are being newly impoverished. The local council which is the main employer in many poorer areas is laying off huge numbers of staff, mostly the lower paid council workers. Other employers are following suit. With even more harmful effect very large numbers of youngsters leaving school or collage are no longer being taken on for work. Lord Young, a former Conservative Minister, said on 19 November 2010 that the effects of the cuts would be minimal because many people leaving the public sector would be retiring (Parry, 2010). He appeared to have no idea when he said this that by not replacing those leaving, youngsters would not gain their jobs, and would then also not provide the services. Benefits are about to be cut, and it is being said that people will be forced to work for their dole, rather like the Youth Training Scheme (which did not work in the 1980s). People are getting rightly angry at the stupidity of the rich.

All this is happening because we have chosen not to make cuts in other ways, not to take from those with most of the national wealth to pay the national debt. We should not be surprised to see crime rise again in the near future, nor to see racial divisions increase, nor to see the two again being linked. And we should also not be surprised to see others say that all this is to be expected if we don't adopt

the most obvious of solutions and instigate social changes that reduce the economic gaps between us, especially in a time of austerity. And we should not be surprised to find other people like Lord Young arguing against such sensible suggestions because they are so ill-informed and estranged from normal society.

Greater equality does not cure racism. Fear of others, of 'outsiders', is higher in more equitable countries. Fear in general is higher in more unequal countries. This might well explain why far-right parties have won so many more votes in parts of mainland Europe as compared to Britain, although in Britain some of the Conservative party have soaked up those votes at certain times. What greater equality does do is reduce the racism endemic within a society, and the crime committed and suffered by those who are part of that society. How can you agree upon a set of laws to equally apply to all if you start off so unequal? How can you see each other as the same if some are so much poorer than others?

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