

Understanding Slavery Initiative

<http://test.understandingslavery.co.uk/casestudy/racially-motivated-crimes/>

Racially Motivated Crimes

Much of the racism and discrimination towards people of African heritage can be traced back to the negative attitudes and stereotypes that were prevalent at the time of transatlantic slavery. This type of discrimination is often focused on the segregation laws of the American South and Apartheid South Africa. These systems of inequality, however, have been proven to exist in contemporary British society in various forms. These include, racially motivated acts of violence and institutional racism – both of which are represented in the case of Stephen Lawrence.

Stephen Lawrence

On 22 April 1993, Stephen Lawrence, a Black 18-year-old A-level student, was fatally stabbed by a gang of young men at a bus stop in the south-east London suburb of Eltham. He was in the company of a friend, Duwayne Brooks, who was chased away from the scene. Within minutes, a passing policeman had arrived on the scene, but despite detailed descriptions of Stephen's attackers, the police were reluctant to pursue the case diligently, under the mistaken belief that his death was the result of gang warfare.

Private prosecution and inquest

As the original Metropolitan Police investigation did not lead to any prosecutions, in 1994 Stephen's parents, Neville and Doreen Lawrence, began a private prosecution. Five suspects – David Norris, Gary Dobson, Luke Knight and brothers Neil and Jamie Acourt – were identified and arrested later that year. Proceedings against Jamie Acourt and David Norris however, did not go to trial. Two years later Neil Acourt, Luke Knight and Gary Dobson stood trial for murder but were acquitted on the grounds that Duwayne Brooks' evidence was unreliable. An inquest into Stephen's death in February 1997 concluded that it had been an 'unlawful killing'. In the wake of this, the Daily Mail directly accused the five of murder by naming them on its front page and invited them to sue if this was wrong. No complaint was ever made. Despite several investigations, a lengthy campaign, a long list of evidence (including surveillance video) and a number of complicated criminal and private prosecutions, none of the men believed to be responsible for Stephen's murder have been brought to book.

The Macpherson report

An inquiry into the shortcomings of the original police investigation was chaired by Sir William Macpherson. His official report, published on 24 February 1999, made 70 recommendations and called for an overhaul of policing to restore confidence. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report has since prompted changes across the board in the practices of the Metropolitan Police and of other police forces in England and Wales. Among Macpherson's conclusions was the fact that the Metropolitan Police Service functioned in a manner that was 'institutionally racist'. This term was clarified as: the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. Responses to the report have resulted in wide-reaching changes in the way London is policed. Improvements have been made in the nature and quality of responses to murders and hate crimes. Community engagement programmes and those to create a more representative workforce have started to move from the periphery to the centre of how law enforcement personnel develop and are supported. Tragically, the courageous stand made by the Lawrence family has not yet succeeded in bringing any of the perpetrators of Stephen's murder to justice. And despite the many changes to policing in London there is still much to be done.