

Bringing robust new evidence of the prevalence and mental health consequences of ethnic and racial harassment

IMPACT CASE STUDY

For the past decade, a multidisciplinary team of researchers led by Dr Alita Nandi have brought new evidence to bear on the debate around the causes, correlates and consequences of ethnic and racial harassment (ERH) and hate crime. The reality for those who experience harassment is a serious issue – not least because the absence of discrimination and harassment is a central marker of a civilised society.

Through our research, we aim to show that ethnic and racial harassment is widespread, impacting the mental health of minorities and their families from a wide range of ethnicities and walks of life. We also want to provide an important counterpoint to the perception that ethnic segregation is deleterious for society: for minorities themselves, ethnic ties are important in preserving mental health and positive health behaviours.

Our research has revealed some disturbing figures:

- In 2009-2010 **around one in ten of ethnic minority people reported experiencing ethnic and racial harassment**; police statistics severely undercount with estimates of less than 1 per cent.
- **Almost twice as many ethnic minority people felt unsafe** or avoided public places due to their religion, ethnicity, race or nationality.

We have also found several significant trends that demonstrate the effect of the local environment – in particular, the beneficial effect of living among co-ethnics for ethnic minorities:

- **Place is significant.** Ethnic minorities who live in areas in which minorities cluster are less likely to experience harassment
- **Ethnic and racial harassment is more common**

among some minorities than others. For instance Chinese men and women, Pakistani men, Sikh and Muslim Indian men, and Bangladeshi women report higher rates of harassment than other groups

- **Harassment affects health and mental health in particular.** Minorities who experience ethnic and racial harassment in the past year report higher mental distress than those who do not – a difference comparable to the mental health difference between the employed and unemployed.
- **Support networks make a difference.** The impacts for those who experience harassment are cushioned by family and community networks
- **Expectations matter.** It is debatable whether, or how far, minorities anticipate such behaviour either based on the circumstances of where they are (e.g., when using late night transport) or more generally (the narrative of mostly low-level harassment is a depressing 'given' in their lives)
- **Political events can exacerbate fear of harassment:** we find that Brexit did not increase the likelihood of experiencing ethnic and racial harassment but feelings of unsafety increased for minorities following the Referendum vote

This impact study emerges from a programme of on-going research. We demonstrate how different activities, trigger points, proactive engagement, events, and our published research are informing policy and practice change. Our robust, quantitative research provides the evidence to help people make informed decisions about what needs to change. Our strong relationships with partners and their organisations including through the [MiSoC Advisory Board](#), our work with the *Understanding*

Society survey team, the Migration and Ethnicity Key advisory group and the Essex [Centre for Migration Studies](#) help facilitate this change.

Background

It is nearly six decades since the first anti-discrimination legislation was passed in the UK. These laws were based on rudimentary methods of understanding racial discrimination, with a focus on jobs and housing. Sophisticated longitudinal datasets, such as [Understanding Society](#), now allow us to probe the health impacts that arise when people experience racially motivated harassment, expanding our understanding of discrimination and its consequences.

Nearly 30 years ago a [survey](#) found that around 13% of ethnic minorities had been racially attacked or racially insulted in the preceding year. Since then migration patterns and attitudes have changed. But even as more people from ethnic minorities [are now born](#) in the UK, reports of harassment have remained relatively stable.

In 2016 [we undertook new research](#) using [Understanding Society](#), from the most recent large-scale nationally representative household survey. We found that in 2010, **9% of all ethnic minorities in Britain reported experiencing ethnic or racially motivated harassment in the previous year.**

At that time our research provided the most comprehensive and up-to-date estimates of prevalence rates of ethnic and racial harassment across different subpopulations and local areas. The findings were strongly supportive of a causal link between ethnic and racial harassment and elevated rates of mental distress.

We found that ethnic and racial harassment is more commonly reported among ethnic minorities who are younger, more highly educated and male. This risk is also positively associated with certain types of places: areas of high white concentration, areas with higher proportion of United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) or British National Party (BNP) voters, and more deprived areas (net of ethnic composition). However, this risk is not higher in areas which are high in other types of crime. Ethnic and racial harassment therefore is a common experience among ethnic minorities and may be a factor even in cases where it is not expected: among more advantaged minority members and in areas of low minority concentration, or in areas with lower overall levels of crime.

In 2021, we updated our research to examine how experiences of ethnic and racial harassment has changed following Brexit. We found no difference in the reports of ethnic and racial harassment as reported by [Understanding Society](#) respondents before and after the Referendum in the period between 2015 and 2018. We did, however, note an increase in *fear* of ethnic and

racial harassment in public spaces during this period, with a 28% increase in the proportion of minorities reporting fearing ethnic and racial harassment after the Referendum.

A strategic approach

Early in the research (2016) we produced several working papers¹ to quickly disseminate our results. We also began meeting with relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, leaders of ethnic minority focused organisations, and members of the police. We built on the existing relationships of our team and reached out to new parties, in particular the police given the overlap of ethnic and racial harassment with criminal definitions of hate crime, to establish an [independent project advisory group](#). This group met annually throughout the course of our project (2015-2017) to advise on outreach activities and policy relevance.

Our initial aim was **to raise awareness of the mental health costs of ethnic and racial harassment in the UK.**

We implemented a series of targeted communications, including blogs and news pieces and engaged in what proved to be important parliamentary enquiries: [Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into hate crime and its violent consequences](#) and the [All Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) for Social Integration's inquiry into the integration of migrants](#).

A final project stakeholder workshop was held in late 2017, which proved essential for getting the research in practice as it led to several important events:

- A discussion with the [Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology](#) (POST), who requested two further research briefings. The first was for the House of Commons Women & Equalities Committee for inquiries into the Race Disparity Audit and Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and the second was for Lord Crisp to use in the House of Lords debate on 'improving mental health services for people from black and ethnic minority communities'. These briefs were subsequently cited in 2017 by Lord Hunt of King's Heath in a [debate](#) on mental health services and in 2018 by Baroness Whitaker in a [question](#) to the Department of Health and Social Care about Mental Health of Ethnic Minorities in the UK. Our evidence was also used in the government's 2017 [Race Disparity Audit](#)
- A discussion with representatives from the police and the IOPC, who invited the researchers to meet the IOPC Learning and Development Officer. This led to the researchers developing and delivering a bespoke training for 40 police investigators working for the IOPC in London and Croydon to improve their practice on dealing with complaints. The research provided investigators with an improved understanding of the

1 ISER working paper: [Ethnic and racial harassment and mental health: identifying sources of resilience](#); Briefing note: [Who experiences ethnic and racial harassment?](#); Briefing note: [The prevalence and persistence of ethnic and racial harassment and its impact on health: a longitudinal analysis](#); and [Prevalence and Mental Health Consequences of Ethnic and Racial Harassment: A Briefing for the IOPC](#)

prevalence of ethnic and racial harassment and its effect on mental health. Bespoke training materials (May 2018) were also produced for rolling out across the organisation. For more detail on this impact see <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/misoc/research/ethnicity-and-migration/past-work/case-study1> and <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/projects/health-and-harassment/Racial-harassment-explainer.pdf>

- Members of QED, an organisation that focuses on improving the social and economic position of ethnic and religious minorities also attended the workshop. They subsequently organised a meeting in Bradford (June 2019) with around 20 representatives from Yorkshire police, health care organisations, hospitals, NHS trusts, housing organisations, and other third sector organisations focussing on hate crimes and women and ethnic minorities' wellbeing. The Founder & Chief Executive, QED Foundation was subsequently invited to join the MisoC advisory board (ethnicity and migration).

Other organisations requested further presentations, including one to the Essex Partnership University Trust (EPUT) Secure Mental Health Services to group of mental health practitioners. The research team continued to produce papers, blogs, news articles and present at events and workshops to maintain momentum about the importance of the findings for policy and practice (please refer to the accompanying timeline document).

Continued engagement

We continue to write for different audiences and engage in different ways, for instance presenting at workshops and seminars, giving radio interviews and publishing journal papers. We provide expert advice to the [Migrants in Theatre](#) project, which tries to understand the challenges faced by migrant theatre professionals and the support structures they need. We regularly speak with our advisory groups to seek feedback and engagement with our research. We continue to disseminate emerging findings and seek to highlight their relevance to policy and practice. For example:

Working with the police

Feedback from our trainings to IOPC investigators included suggestions to present to senior IOPC officials with authority to change IOPC policy and practice. The IOPC also requested that this training be rolled out nationally. We produced training materials for IOPC but recognise a need to review progress in implementation.

We are currently in discussion with Essex Police to implement a data sharing agreement to access data on hate crime across Essex. This will provide more in-depth analysis to try and understand how hate crime evolves, whether it is under reported and who is most likely to be affected or victimised by hate crime. Our evidence will inform strategies to prevent, investigate, detect and prosecute criminal offences, as well as safeguard against and prevent threats to public security in relation to hate

crimes in Essex. Our work will also have great value to those who support victims and mental health organisations.

Working with government

We regularly submit our evidence to parliamentary and government consultations and enquiries, such as the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry: Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics.

We proactively seek opportunities to enhance academic-policy relationships. MiSoC's first Policy Fellow joins us from the Race Disparity Unit, with whom we have built strong relations. We are providing research and mentoring support to the fellow, who is working on '[Inclusive Britain](#)', the government's response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. We work closely with the government's [Open Innovation Team](#) (OIT) to implement the Policy Fellowship and share our expertise at [seminars](#) and events.

Ongoing and new research

We continue to produce peer-reviewed journal papers from our initial research. Our paper, [When does hate hurt the most?](#), provides a robust estimate of the association between reports of ethnic and racial harassment (ERH) and mental ill-health, **and is the first to highlight generational differences in ethnic attachment as a protective factor**. Our finding of the high mental health cost of harassment raises the alarm for tackling hate crimes and hate incidents which have been increasing over the last years in many western countries ([O'Neill 2017](#); [FBI 2017](#); and [FRA 2018](#)).

We also challenge the accepted view among policy makers that ethnic minority integration is a panacea for an ethnically divided society, highlighting the protective and beneficial effects of having a strong ethnic attachment for ethnic minorities.

More recent research [published in Frontiers in Sociology](#) shows that although experiences of harassment did not increase following the Brexit vote, minorities reported higher levels of fear in public spaces. Counterintuitively, this increase in fear was most pronounced among relatively privileged minorities and those living in areas of lower right-wing support. We believe that minorities living in "safe areas" (areas where the risk of harassment was lower), who had a lower level of baseline fear, may have experienced a stronger increase in response to the xenophobic rhetoric surrounding the Brexit vote than minorities who lived in areas where harassment was more expected.

Long-term funding essential for impact

The long-term funding provided through MiSoC is essential for sustaining and building collaborations and partnerships that lead to impact. Part of this research was funded through ESRC SDA Initiative (The Prevalence and Persistence of Ethnic and Racial Harassment and its Impact on Health: A Longitudinal Analysis, February 2016 – 30 November 2017, £ 138, 060 ESRC ES/

NO11791/1 and in 2016/17 from the University of Essex (Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research) Strategic Fund).

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