

The Black Policy Institute

Shaping Equitable and Just Policies



The role of Black Policy Institutes in shaping the policies that inspire greater equality for all communities cannot be understated. Black communities have consistently experienced racial disparities in the socio-economic system, particularly in vital areas such as the media, criminal justice system and financial security. Ultimately, these inequalities lead to knock on effects. The well-established link between social disadvantage and crime is just one notable impact, with Black individuals “overrepresented” in the criminal justice process, ironically as the result of a lack of diversity in the UK’s policy-making processes.

However, it is of vital importance that we tackle the systemic difficulties that minority communities face, rather than simply treating the “symptoms” of these issues. One example of this are ‘affirmative action’ policies. Although it is important that minority applicants receive a fair chance, one of the biggest limitations of this policy is that the achievements of such applicants can be dismissed. Most of the time it is impossible to tell whether a specific applicant

genuinely deserves the place they have been given or instead is part of a quota.

Throughout this article, I will explore how advocacy for ethnically equitable policies by Black Policy Institutes can have a major impact on empowering Black communities and the policies that would be most beneficial to such communities.

The Power of Portrayal

Despite mainstream media having moved away from reinforcing overt racism, stereotypes and bias remain. The effect of these portrayals can be deeply damaging, especially when Black individuals are seen through a historically polarised lens of criminals, thugs and drug-dealers.

A contemporary example of this is shown through the 'urban ghetto' in British television drama 'Top Boy'. Exemplifying the slamming representation of Black communities in the mainstream media, the series is a double-edged sword. The topics explored in the show, such as socio-economic dissonance, crime and immigration resonates with Black audiences, who are disproportionately affected by them. However, the show's writers do an equally good job of showcasing the primarily Black cast as murderers and drug-dealers, riddled with problems of their own and desperate to escape the same 'ghetto' that is glorified.

The notion of a Black 'underclass' sweeping through the urban communities of London is a dangerous stereotype to portray, with the themes of 'Blackness' and 'crime' shown as almost synonymous. Not only an anti-thesis from the educational series creator Ronan Bennett aimed to present, life as a Black Briton is far more than a rise through the 'struggle' and it is our job to help foster new perspectives and break down the barriers of old.

Furthermore, the series is described by many as 'accurate'. Although these issues are important to make those suffering feel 'seen' and awareness more widespread, at its core this is another series focusing on Black trauma - an already saturated market.

However, Bennett need not be given all the blame, as the dichotomy of Black stereotyping is a common scenario for those within the media. A 2021 *McKinsey* report stated that '90% of optioned Black content is shelved', leading to many Black creatives resorting to selling stories about personal trauma to gain more traction from a mostly White executive team. With White individuals making up 87% of TV executives and 92% of film executives, an unconscious adoption of 'experience bias' can stifle media content at the last hurdle.

Even Issa Rae, award-winning creator of Black comedy-drama ‘Insecure’, stated that “many white audiences and critics tend to reward traumatising depictions, or their own biased perceptions of what Blackness is”. This results in less interest for Black content unless, as a creative executive stated “its Wakanda or poverty”.

Another contemporary example is the popular television series ‘Snowfall’, about a “smart student who rises to the top of the crack cocaine business”. Even with his intelligence playing a major role in the series description, the series still falls back into the same stereotyping of Black males as dangerous drug-dealers. 13 years on from the Opportunity Agenda study’s findings that “negative mass media portrayals were strongly linked with lower life expectancy among Black men”, it can be argued that these platforms continually harm the community to the point that Black lives are portrayed as undervalued.

It would be illusionary to believe that without action, the media will begin changing perceptions of Black lifestyle on our screens. However, advocating for policies that address the issue of Black individuals’ portrayal can lead to real change within the industry. We need to show that is possible to break the dichotomy of trauma that the Black community finds themselves showcased as, especially when, for most of the community, this is simply fantasy.

Examples of these policies include the support of initiatives that prioritise and promote Black voices, providing opportunities for genuine and authentic representation of the community. It is easy to envision Black audiences being as enthused by the stories that ‘Top Boy’ brings to life as the portrayal of a strong Black leader like ‘Jessica Pearson’ in the legal drama ‘Suits’.

By highlighting initiatives such as ‘OTV’, a non-profit platform supporting media content by minority communities and their impact on promoting authentic voices, we can see the potential for positive change within the media’s representation and it’s broader implications for Black communities.

‘OTV’ has a number of initiatives, including a fellowship program and the ‘Study Hall’, a online workshop on the media industry. Its artists produce content for platforms such as Netflix and HBO, showing that it is possible to affect real exposure. Co-founder Elijah McKinnon says that “Black media making organisations recognise that giving the material wider exposure creates a ‘really beautiful opportunity’ for broader learning and change”. With the platform having released more than 75 pieces of original content since 2015, it is evident that this formula works.

Finally, the promotion of these initiatives brings with it even more socio-economic benefits, such as economic freedom for those Black creatives able to curate a strong career, an increased development in Black talent and an

improvement in the quality of content. Black voices engaged within these areas can provide a unique view on topics, leading to more innovative ways to resonate for broader audiences. This is a quality to be celebrated, not stifled.

Criminal justice: Distrust and disparity

Trust. The firm belief in the reliability, truth or ability of someone or something. The same reason that so many Black individuals disproportionately form the makeup of the criminal justice system.

Generations of systemic racism and overt discrimination have eroded trust between Black individuals and the police, resulting in profound consequences for the community. Understanding the complex nature of the distrust in place is crucial for addressing this issue at its roots and being able to help the community regain a sense of control in a system that often leaves them behind.

First, let's begin with a statistic. 51% of British-born BAME individuals believe that the criminal justice system is discriminatory against specific groups. It is unsurprising therefore, that Black defendants consistently have the lowest guilty plea rate, at 66%.

Under current UK guidelines, if convicted, those who plead their innocence and proceed to trial receive a longer sentence. Defendants have all kinds of reasons for pleading 'not guilty', stemming from genuine innocence to a deep-rooted belief in the scepticisms of the systems they find themselves in. Either way, the evidence of risk aversion – more simply put, the tendency to prefer the certain option – within the criminal justice system suggests a deeply rooted fear of the resultant consequence.

This is simply an example, as distrust in the system can be seen as early as first contact with police. Given the "institutionally racist" label given to the Met in the aftermath of Stephen Lawrence's murder, alongside the characteristic stop-and-search tactics that Black Londoners are inexplicably used to, it's no surprise that Black individuals are naturally averse to law enforcement.

Between April 2021 and March 2022, there were 27.2 stop and searches for every 1,000 Black people in the UK, compared to 5.6 for every 1,000 White people. Individuals who are repeatedly subjected to stop-and-search based on their race may experience feelings of stigma and marginalisation. Being treated as 'suspicious' based entirely on race or creed can have major psychological impacts, including those feelings Black individuals have come so used to be portrayed as: anger, powerlessness and resentment. This also gives rise to the explosion of public outrage when high-profile cases reach the ears of the

community, straining relations with the police and encouraging an 'Us v. Them' approach to policing.

Even with the opportunity for a favourable outcome, Black individuals face systemic bias at every stage of the system, from disproportionate policing to disparities in sentencing, so is it any wonder why they are taking the 'safe' option? In a system where some Black individuals don't even trust the advice their own advocate gives them, it is emblematic of a vicious cycle.

Through policy advocacy, we can push for policy reforms that aim to promote fairness and accountability within the criminal justice system. Police reform is just one example of this. We can use this policy to work towards building trust between them and communities of colour, helping to remove the fear that plagues the Black community. Increased transparency and accountability, while we will face obstacles, will bring about a better quality of life for both the officers constantly in the line of fire over racist allegations and the Black communities who suffer from them.