

The murder of Stephen Lawrence and the UK's troubled history of institutional racism

What's the issue?

Stephen Lawrence was born to parents who had moved to Britain from Jamaica in the 1960s, and was a talented college student who dreamed of becoming an architect. On the evening of April 22nd 1993, when he was just 18 years old, he was brutally murdered on his way home from his uncle's house. Stephen and his friend Duwayne Brooks had been waiting for a bus in Eltham, south-east London, when a group of five or six white youths began moving towards them threateningly. Duwayne managed to escape before the gang got aggressive, but Stephen was unable to get away. Within just a few seconds, the group surrounded Stephen, stabbed him and left him bleeding on the street.

Stephen had not done anything wrong, and his actions that night had nothing to do with the motive of the crime – he had simply been waiting for a bus on his way home. The white group that murdered Stephen, a black teenager, had shouted racial abuse seconds before surrounding and attacking him. Stephen's colour of skin had made him vulnerable enough to become the victim of a racially motivated murder.

What happened afterwards?

Stephen's murder was not the only crime of its kind. The neighbourhood he was murdered in, Eltham, had some of the highest annual numbers of racial incidents in the country at the time. Stephen's murderers had themselves previously committed numerous racist attacks in the area. But what struck the public about Stephen's case was the jarring contrast between the seriousness of the crime, and the incompetent and corrupt way with which it was treated by the police. Stephen's murder had been seen by three witnesses, and dozens of residents left the police open or anonymous tips pointing to five main suspects. Despite this, it took more than two months for the police to arrest all five, and, less than a month later, the charges against them were dropped due to insufficient evidence.

Stephen's family initially placed trust in the justice system but began to grow frustrated at the treatment of the case and the behaviour of the Metropolitan Police. It took multiple investigations, media and international pressure, and nearly 20 years for any progress to be made. Two of the murderers are now in prison after having been convicted in 2012, but the other members of the group were never tried. In August 2020, the Metropolitan Police announced that they were declaring the murder investigation inactive, a decision that has dismayed Stephen's parents.

Institutional racism in the United Kingdom

Perhaps the most significant factor contributing to the botched investigation of Stephen's murder was the institutional racism of the UK's police and criminal justice system. It affected the murder case from the very beginning, when Duwayne Brooks went to the police to say his friend had been murdered and was met with "constant questions... about Stephen and (his) integrity". Stephen's family, too, were treated in a similar way, and were met with little sympathy, unprofessional behaviour and groundless disbelief and doubt from the police. In 1997, after much pressure, the

then Home Secretary Jack Straw launched an inquiry into the investigation. The resulting Macpherson Report declared the Metropolitan Police “institutionally racist”, confirming that racism and anti-black bias had significantly hampered the investigation at every stage, from the initial evidence-gathering to the treatment of witnesses and Stephen’s friends and family.

The Macpherson Report was of landmark importance because it revealed that the UK’s criminal justice system was riddled with issues of institutional racism. At the time it was published, the police were still exempt from the UK’s Race Relations Act, meaning they were under no obligation to eliminate discriminatory practices within their ranks. Such institutional racism within the police manifests itself not just in the handling of hate crimes, but also in the treatment of black suspects, in the groundless ‘stop and search’ of black civilians, and in the treatment of black police officers.

These problems did not arise merely by accident or even out of sheer incompetence. Fifteen years after the Macpherson Report was published, a former undercover policeman came forward and revealed how he had been tasked with finding information to discredit Stephen’s friends and family. This operation, part of the police force’s “systemic corruption”, was investigated in yet another report that found “devastating” issues of corruption in the Metropolitan Police.

What has been done to prevent something like this from happening again?

Since Stephen’s murder, some steps have been taken to address systemic racism within the police and criminal justice system. The police are now subject to the Race Relations Act, and taskforces have been set up to root out racism and corruption. Citizens’ groups have been instrumental in making progress, too, with mass protests, campaigning groups such as the Stephen Lawrence Trust, and movements such as Black Lives Matter putting pressure on the system to change. But the issues still persist. Hate crimes are on the rise and [reached record levels in 2021-2022](#). Black people are still far more likely to be stopped and searched than other groups, and figures also show that black people are [more likely to have Tasers](#) or [force used against them](#) by the police. It remains more important than ever to root out racism in the police and criminal justice system and ensure that people from black, Asian and minority communities in Britain are able to achieve justice.

Questions to consider

- *How do you think the investigation into Stephen Lawrence’s murder could have been better handled?*
- *How do experiences with police and the criminal justice system differ between the Jewish community and black, Asian and minority communities? How do they differ between black and white Jews?*
- *What responsibilities do we have as a Jewish community to help eliminate systemic racism in the UK?*
- *How can we help start a discussion about systemic racism in the UK?*
- *Stephen was murdered in Eltham, a neighbourhood which at the time was fraught with deep-seated issues of racism. How can we bring groups from different communities together to combat tensions like these where we live?*

Further resources

Watch ITV’s series [Stephen Lawrence – Has Britain Changed?](#)

Read the Stephen Lawrence Trust’s Timeline of [Stephen’s Story](#)