

The Research, Development and Statistics Directorate exists to improve policy making, decision taking and practice in support of the Home Office purpose and aims, to provide the public and Parliament with information necessary for informed debate and to publish information for future use.

Findings are produced by the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. For further copies contact:

Communication Development Unit
Room 264,
Home Office,
50 Queen Anne's Gate,
London SW1H 9AT.

Tel: 020 7273 2084
Fax: 020 7222 0211
publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

Ethnicity and parole

Uma Moorthy, Kath Cahalin and Philip Howard

Past research has shown that prisoners of South Asian and Chinese/other ethnicity are more likely to be granted parole than black or white prisoners. This study of 6,208 parole applications made to the Parole Board between April 1999 and March 2000 was undertaken to determine the extent to which these differences are a reflection of the characteristics associated with release rather than related to ethnicity.

Key points

- Preliminary analysis found that South Asians and Chinese/other prisoners were more likely to have characteristics associated with release on parole:
 - South Asian and Chinese/other prisoners were more likely to have committed offences which have high release rates onto parole (such as drugs offences) and less likely to have committed offences with low rates of release (such as burglary and sex offences).
 - The rate of release onto parole increased as the number of disciplinary adjudications of the prisoner decreased. South Asian prisoners were more likely to have had no or fewer adjudications than other ethnic groups. Black prisoners were most likely to have had adjudications.
 - Prisoners held in open prisons were much more likely to be granted parole than prisoners elsewhere. A higher proportion of South Asian and Chinese/other prisoners were held in open prisons than black or white prisoners.
- The success of a parole application is related to a large number of factors. A model to predict parole decisions was constructed (for non-sexual offenders) which took into account the combined effect of these factors on the release decision. The model correctly predicted the actual outcome of the parole decision in nearly four out of every five cases.
- As the ethnic group of the prisoner did not have a significant effect on the parole decision it was excluded from the model. Despite this, the model correctly predicted the variations in release rates between ethnic groups for non-sexual offenders. This suggests that variations in release rates between ethnic groups can be explained in terms of factors taken into consideration when the risk assessment underlying the parole decision was made.

Parole and ethnic group

Parole, also referred to as discretionary conditional release, is a mechanism by which prisoners can obtain early release on licence from custodial sentences of four years or more. A major objective of the Parole Board is to deal with cases in a consistent, unbiased and non-discriminatory manner.

Therefore, it is of concern that the rate at which different ethnic groups are released onto parole

varies. South Asian prisoners and Chinese/other prisoners are significantly more likely to be granted parole than white or black prisoners. ('Black' includes black Caribbean and black African; 'South Asian' includes Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi; 'Chinese and other' includes Chinese and other Asian.) At the request of the Public Accounts Committee, this study was undertaken to determine to what extent these differences were a reflection of the characteristics associated with release.

Parole

Parole was introduced as a result of the Criminal Justice Act 1967 and reformed by the Criminal Justice Act 1991. Prisoners whose sentence length is at least four years but less than life can make a parole application when they have served half their sentence. If a first application is unsuccessful, further annual applications can be made until the two-thirds point of the sentence is reached when all prisoners are released unless they have ‘added days’ as a result of offences committed while in prison. A released prisoner remains under supervision in the community until the three-quarters point of the sentence and can be recalled to prison if a further offence or a breach of parole conditions occurs at any point up to the date the sentence expires.

For example, in the study period, 64% of South Asian prisoners and 53% of Chinese/other prisoners who were considered for parole were released compared with only 43% of black and 39% of white prisoners (Table 1).

Past research by Hood and Shute (2000) suggests that ethnic differences in parole rates can largely be explained by ‘legitimate’ factors. South Asian prisoners have a higher release rate onto parole because they are more likely than other ethnic groups to fit the parole criteria. This study builds upon Hood and Shute’s (2000) work by using a larger sample, in order to test their findings.

The study

The current study was based on 6,208 parole applications made to the Parole Board between April 1999 and March 2000. Figures 1 to 5 are based on this sample (see methodological note). The study consisted of:

- preliminary analysis – carried out to determine which factors are related to the decision to grant parole and whether ethnic groups differ on these factors
- a model – to determine how well these factors (in combination) could predict the parole decision, which factors were significant in predicting the parole decision and, in particular, whether they could explain differences between ethnic groups.

Preliminary analysis of factors affecting parole decisions

Gender

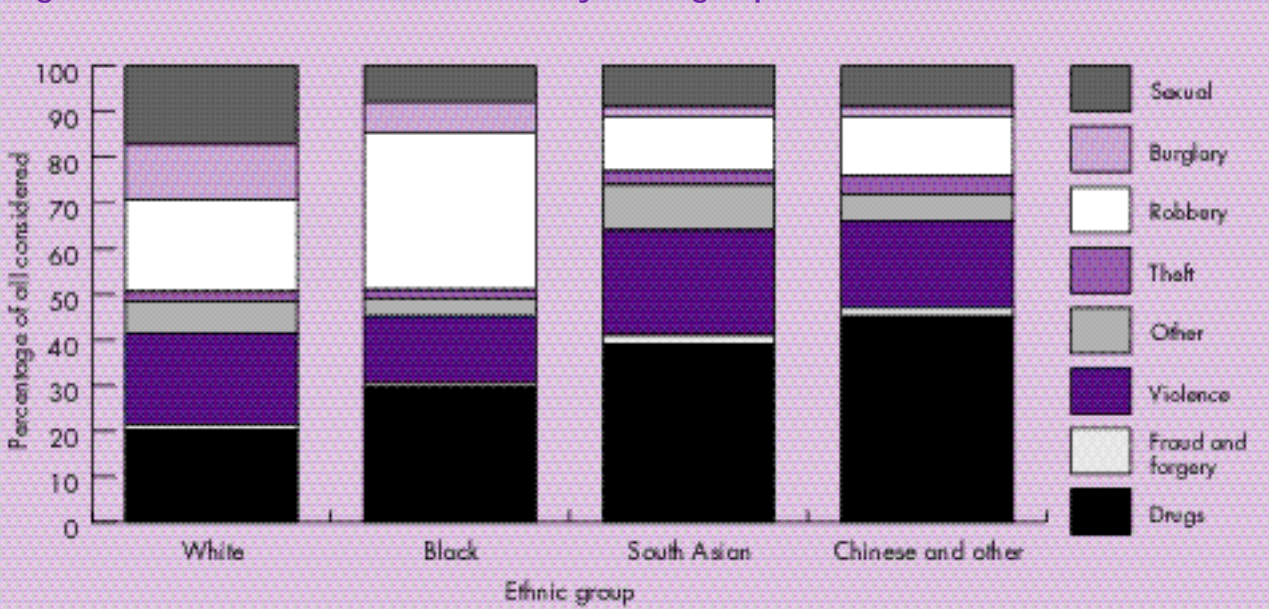
Parole applications for women were much more successful (70%) than applications from men (40%). However, the small number of women in the sample (220 or 3.5%) precludes further analysis of gender by ethnic group.

Table 1 Prisoners considered and released on parole in 1999/2000 by ethnic group

	White	Black	South Asian	Chinese/other	Total
Opt out*	893	113	17	25	1,048
Considered	4,775	1,023	244	166	6,213**
Released	1,879	438	156	88	2,561
Release rate	39%	43%	64%	53%	41%

Note: * Those prisoners who do not want to apply for parole. ** Includes five prisoners that have not been categorised in an ethnic group.

Figure 1 Distribution of criminal offence by ethnic group



Offence type

Release rates onto parole vary for different offence types. Drugs offences had higher than average release rates (65%) whilst burglary and sexual offences had lower than average release rates (25% and 15% respectively). South Asian prisoners and Chinese/other prisoners had higher proportions in the offence categories with the highest release rates (Figure 1). For example, in the sample, 39% of South Asian and 45% of Chinese/other prisoners were convicted of drug offences compared with 30% of black prisoners and 20% of white prisoners. Conversely, a lower proportion were in the categories with low release rates. For example, 17% of white prisoners were convicted of sex offences, compared with between 8% and 9% of other prisoners. Burglary accounted for 12% of white prisoners but only 7% of black and 2% of South Asian or Chinese/other prisoners.

Adjudications

The number of disciplinary offences a prisoner commits whilst in prison may indicate how the prisoner will behave once released. The rate of release for parole was higher for prisoners who had committed fewer such offences whilst in prison. The rate of release for prisoners with zero to three adjudications was 56% compared to only 20% for prisoners with four or more adjudications. South Asian prisoners were more likely than other groups to have no adjudications and less likely to have ten or more (Figure 2). The average number of adjudications were:

- South Asian prisoners: 3.3
- white prisoners: 4.8
- Chinese/other prisoners: 6.1
- black prisoners: 7.9.

Length of sentence

The release rate for parole varied by sentence length – as the sentence length increased, the rate of release for parole

decreased. Over half of the sample were serving sentences of four to less than five years – their release rate was 45% (compared with the 30% probability of parole for the 6% of prisoners serving sentences of at least ten years). Ethnic groups differed very little in terms of the distribution of sentence lengths within the sample (Figure 3). The average sentence length was a fraction higher for South Asian and Chinese and other prisoners than it was for black and white prisoners.

Breaches

Release rates for those who had breached bail were low (31%). Figure 4 shows that white prisoners were more likely to have breached probation or a Community Service Order (CSO) than other ethnic groups and that South Asian and Chinese/other prisoners were less likely to have breached bail than white or black prisoners.

Figure 3 Distribution of sentence lengths by ethnic group

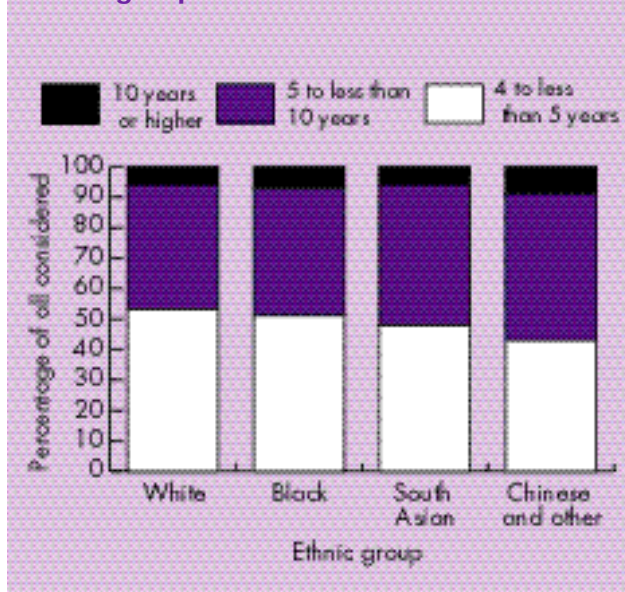


Figure 2 Distribution of number of adjudications per offender

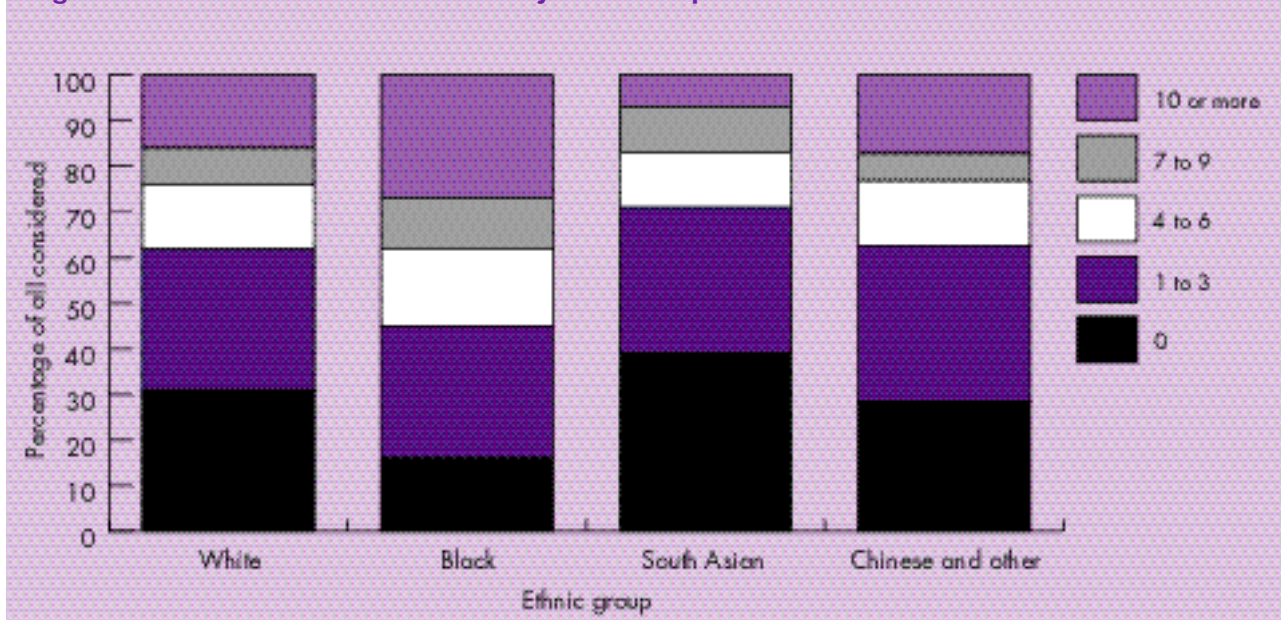
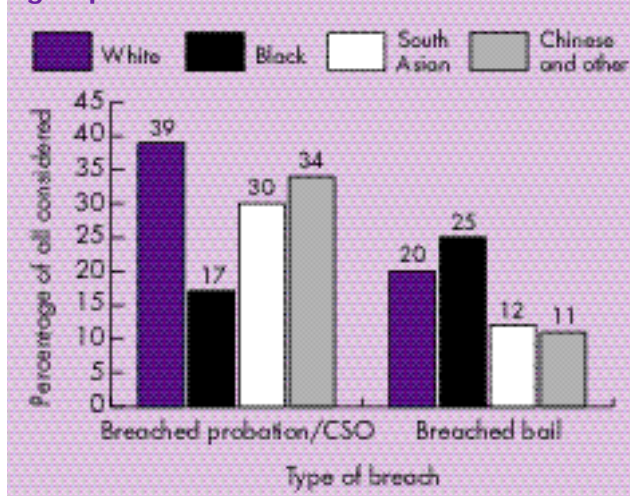


Figure 4 Percentage of prisoners who breached probation/CSO and bail, by ethnic group



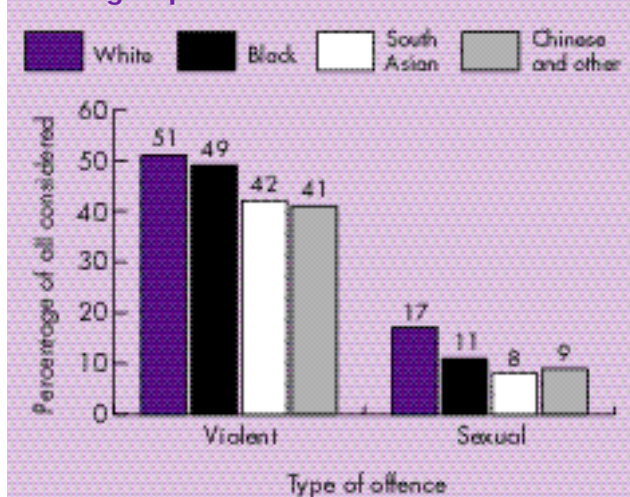
Committed a violent or sexual offence

Prisoners with convictions for a violent or a sexual offence (whether previous or current) were less likely to be granted parole. Prisoners convicted of a sexual offence had a particularly low release rate (18%). Figure 5 shows that, in the sample, black and white prisoners had a slightly higher rate of violent and sex offending than that for South Asian and Chinese/other prisoners.

Offending Behaviour Programmes

Prisoners' participation in, and completion of, Offending Behaviour Programmes (OBPs) whilst in prison is an indication of willingness to address their offending behaviour. Hood and Shute (2000) found, for their sample, that if the Senior Probation Officer stated that prisoners had completed an OBP, their chances of release were increased. However, the present study did not replicate this finding, perhaps due to the particular characteristics of offenders involved in OBPs. Furthermore, the current sample contained only a small number of minority ethnic

Figure 5 Percentage of prisoners ever convicted of a violent or sexual offence, by ethnic group



prisoners who had completed such programmes, making it impossible to compare the impact of programme completion on release rates between offenders of different ethnic groups.

Prison category

The rate of release onto parole was particularly high for those held in open prisons, as might be expected – 22% of South Asian prisoners were held in open prisons compared with 6% to 8% of other prisoners.

Building a model to predict parole decisions

The success of a parole application is related to a large number of factors, as identified above and in other studies. The interactions between these factors can be complex. Through the use of a statistical technique (logistic regression), a model was constructed which took into account the combined effect of these factors on the release decision. Sex offenders were excluded because the model performed badly for this group. This is supported by Hood and Shute's finding that different factors were associated with the release of sex offenders.

Table 2 lists the variables retained in the final model (only factors reaching statistical significance were retained). The last column shows the estimated effect of each variable on the probability of success for a parole application. The main features of the model, in descending order of importance, are:

- **Behaviour during sentence:** this was measured by the number of adjudications against the prisoner and was the most important predictor in the model. A prisoner who received more than three adjudications had very low odds of release.
- **The current location of the applicant:** this was also an important determinant of the probability of release on parole. Prisoners who were housed in open conditions were the most successful in being granted parole. Since transfer into open conditions indicates successful compliance and progress during sentence, this result is not surprising. Prisoners from local prisons and closed training prisons had odds of release more than 60% lower than those from open prisons (Table 2). The least successful applications came from prisoners in vulnerable prisoner units, although there were few of these in the sample once sex offenders were excluded.
- **Type of offence:** the most successful parole applications came from drug offenders. Compared with these, all other offence groups had reduced odds of release of 50% or more.
- **Number of parole application:** the likelihood of release was highest at the second parole application, and still substantially higher at a third or subsequent application than at the first application.
- **Age at the time of the non-parole date:** various age variables were examined and the age at the time of

Table 2 Effect of variables in the model on the odds of release on parole

Variable	Details of variable	Change in likelihood of release*	Variable	Details of variable	Change in likelihood of release*	
Adjudications	No adjudications (reference category)	–	Age at non-parole date	Less than 21	–42%	
	Between 1 and 3	–58%		21–24	+64%	
	Between 4 and 6	–90%		25–29	+13%	
	7 or more adjudications	–95%		30–39 (reference category)	–	
Current location of applicant	Open prison (reference category)	–		40–49	–27%	
	Closed Young Offenders' Institution	–29%		50–59	–34%	
	Vulnerable Prisoners Unit	–91%		60 or over	–53%	
	Local prison	–68%	Juvenile convictions	Juvenile criminal convictions received prior to current conviction	–15%	
	Closed training prison	–60%		Adult convictions	Adult criminal convictions received prior to current conviction	–14%
	Other institution	+20%	Breach of CSO or probation order**		Has at least one breach (reference category)	–
Type of offence relating to current conviction	Drug offence (reference category)	–		Never breached	+41%	
	Violence against the person	–59%	Rate	Rate of offending measured as number of convictions received per year since first conviction	–1%	
	Burglary	–68%		Gender	Offender is male (reference category)	–
	Robbery	–54%	Offender is female		+80%	
	Theft	–50%	Number of parole reviews		Current application is 1st review (reference category)	–
	Fraud or forgery	–70%			Current application is 2nd review	+312%
Other offences	–70%	Current application is 3rd or later		+169%		

Notes: * For each variable the likelihood of release on parole is compared to a reference category using an odds ratio. ** CSOs (Community Service Orders) were the predecessors of the current Community Punishment Orders, while Probation Orders were the predecessors of the current Community Rehabilitation Orders.

Factors *not* selected by the model were breach of bail, current sex offence, current violent offence, effective sentence length, attendance on Enhanced Thinking Skills course, number of Offending Behaviour Programmes completed, total number of previous convictions and whether ever convicted of a violent offence.

the non-parole date (i.e. the two-thirds point of the sentence) was selected as the best in the model. Offenders in their 20s were more likely to be granted parole compared with those aged 30 to 39. Young offenders and those aged 60 or more had similar, lowered odds of release.

- **Other factors:** previous offending history as measured by number of previous convictions (each previous adult/juvenile conviction reduced the odds of release by 14% to 15%), breaches of previous community

sentences (those who had no record of breach had odds of release increased by 41%), rate of offending (had only a small effect on the odds of release) and gender (female applicants were much more likely than male applicants to be paroled).

Predictive power of the model

The model was constructed using two-thirds of the available observations, which were selected randomly. The remaining one-third of the observations were used to

validate the model, the quality of the predictions made by the model for the 'validation data set' being compared to those from the 'construction data set'. In the 'validation data set', 74% of outcomes were correctly predicted. The proportion of correct predictions over both sets of data was 77%.

Ethnicity in the parole model

The ethnicity of the parole applicant is never explicitly referred to in the parole dossier or elsewhere during the parole process. The construction of the basic prediction model replicates this 'colour-blindness' on the part of the Parole Board. However, preliminary analysis showed that members of different ethnic groups fared differently with their parole applications. In order to assess whether ethnicity as a variable could add to the predictive power of the model, a categorical variable for *ethnicity* was added.

The categorical ethnicity variable was expressed as the ten-point ethnicity classification in use by the Office for National Statistics prior to the 2001 census: White, Asian Bangladeshi, Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Asian other, Black African, Black Caribbean, Black other, Chinese, Other.

It was found that adding an ethnicity variable to the model did not add to its predictive power. None of the coefficients for the ethnicity categories within this expanded model

were statistically significant, nor did the addition of ethnicity affect the direction or size of the effect of any of the variables already in the model.

The effect of combining the ten ethnicity categories into broader ethnic groupings such as White, Black, Asian and Other was checked. The results of this new four-category analysis were very similar to those of the ten-category analysis. In other words, there was no improvement to the forecasting ability of the model as a result of the inclusion of the new ethnicity categories. As a final check, the predictive power of the basic model was found to have good predictive ability for offenders from each minority ethnic group.

Summary

This study demonstrated that there was no evidence of differential treatment of minority ethnic prisoners by the Parole Board and that differences in parole release rates between ethnic groups were likely to result from other characteristics associated with release. These findings suggest the need for routine monitoring and occasional systematic research to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and the predictors of release on parole.

Methodological note

The analysis of factors affecting the parole decision was based on 6,208 parole applications made to the Parole Board between April 1999 and March 2000, inclusive. The regression model was based on a sample of 3,440 applications made between April 1999 and June 2000 by non-sex offenders for whom a complete set of data was available.

Reference

Hood, R. and Shute, S. (2000). *The Parole System at work – a study of risk-based decision making*. Home Office Research Study 202. London: Home Office.

For related reports see *Perceptions of race and conflict: perspectives of minority ethnic prisoners and prison officers* by Kimmett Edgar and Carol Martin, Home Office Online Report OLR12/04 and *Improving race relations in prisons: what works?* by Tom Ellis, Catherine Tedstone and Diane Curry, Home office Online Report11/04 They are available on the Home Office RDS website <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/>

At the time of the study Uma Moorthy, Kath Cahalin and Philip Howard were members of the Offenders and Corrections Unit, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate.