Ethnic Discrimination in Reports of Offenders to the Police

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem and Purpose

Are persons of foreign extraction discriminated against when crime victims decide whether they will report the offenders to the police? Is it, when relevant circumstances are taken into account, more probable that the general public report offenders if these are of foreign extraction than if they are not? This question is interesting for at least two reasons. One reason is that such discrimination conflicts with demands for equality. Another reason is related to the fact that if there is ethnic discrimination in the reports to the police, registered data on offenders will be distorted since they largely originate from such reports.1 Explaining whether ethnic discrimination exists in the reports could therefore shed light on some criminological problems. For example, it is possible that it could help answer the question of whether immigrants tend to be more criminal than natives. This question has been raised in many European countries, because it has been found that immigrants are overrepresented in official statistics of persons suspected of a crime.

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The issue of how offenders with different ethnic statuses are treated in reports to the police has attracted some interest in the research, but has not, in my view, been adequately dealt with. There is a need for new approaches, and this article reports the results of such a study of Swedish crime victims.

1.2. Previous Research

Research on people’s decisions to report or not to report the crimes to which they have fallen victim has been performed for a long time, at least since the 70s. Personality characteristics of the victim and situational circumstances have been studied as possible causes. For example, the seriousness of the crime has been found to be very important.\(^2\)

Other factors that have been studied are characteristics of the offender, including ethnic status or race.\(^3\) However, as far as I have been able to discover, the research does not give any clear answer to the question about the existence of ethnic discrimination in the decisions. There are three main reasons for this. An adequate analysis of discrimination should fulfil the following requirements: 1) It should be based on information about victims’ decisions to report or not to report identified offenders, 2) discrimination should be socially defined, not defined from the perspective of the decision-maker, 3) the victim’s social relation to the offender should be considered. However, all these requirements are seldom or never fulfilled in the research. Below, I discuss these shortcomings.

The analysis should be based on information about victims’ decisions to report or not to report identified offenders. Several studies have been made of how individuals decide to report or not to report the crimes they have fallen victim to. In such studies, characteristics of the offender are often used as explanatory factors. Of course, in order to be able to report an offender the victim must know the identity of this person. Therefore, research should be based on information about the decisions on identified offenders, but this has not always been the case.

Knowing that the victim has identified the offender is crucial when elucidating the influence of the social relation between the victim and the offender on the decision to report or not to report, a relation that has played a crucial role in some
