

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Raw statistics can be misleading

You've all heard the old saw, ?What goes around comes around.?

And while it's not always true, it often is.

A prime current example can be found in one of the Toronto Star's endless so-called ?investigations,? where Canada's largest newspaper breathlessly reported that Toronto police ? or for that matter, the province of Ontario ? do not keep statistics on the number of blacks shot by police.

?You won't find data on the race of those killed in Toronto,? shouted a subhead on the main front-page story, ?because it isn't collected.?

At first blush that might seem a bit odd. Police ? and governments, too ? seem to keep statistics on everything, so why on earth wouldn't they know something as serious as the race of people shot by police?

Certainly some leaders of the black community want to know the answer. Anthony Morgan, a lawyer with the African Canadian Legal Clinic (AFLC), told the Star: ?It's absolutely critical for us to have this information, to address the over-representation of black people in these use-of-force incidents ... We can't even get to solutions if we don't have concrete numbers ...?

And University of Toronto criminologist Scot Wortley, who conducted a study for the AFLC in 2006, found that eight of 12 Toronto police shootings between January 2000 and June 2006 involved black people, a total of 66 per cent when the black population was just 6.7 per cent of Toronto.

?Hopefully, this data can close the debate over whether aboriginal and black residents are more exposed to police use of force than white people,? he wrote. ?They are.?

Alas, using raw statistics in this fashion ? as surely Wortley and various black activists know ? is completely ?misleading,? which is the point that Toronto Police Association president Mike McCormack made to the Star. He says just looking at race data doesn't provide the entire picture.

It certainly doesn't. Which brings us to the part of ?what goes around comes around.?

Star columnist Rosie DiManno, in her wonderfully independent style, rushed into print the next day to add a little context to the controversy, recalling that 26 years ago then Toronto staff inspector Julian Fantino ? later on police chief ? as head of 31 Division, created a huge stir when he released some race-based statistics to North York's committee on community, race and ethnic relations. According to Fantino ? who was widely condemned for his efforts, especially, if memory serves, in the aforementioned Toronto Star ? blacks made up 6 per cent of the Jane-Finch population, they accounted for 82 per cent of robberies and muggings, 55 per cent of purse-snatchings and 51 per cent of drug offences the previous year.

As DiManno reports, then solicitor-general Joan Smith castigated Fantino for collecting and released data that ?accomplishes nothing useful.? And blacks activist groups pointedly attacked Fantino ? along with the Star ? for releasing the statistics.

So here's the rub. When the police statistics put the black community in a less than favourable light, it was deemed wrong ? indeed, racist ? to collect such statistics. The argument used then by many was that just reading off such statistics doesn't take into account all sorts of social and economic issues which have a huge impact on the lives of blacks, particularly young black males.

And that, of course, is true.

But it is equally true to bandy about statistics purporting to show blacks as victims of police use-of-force simply by comparing the numbers of those shot with the population base. Just as more blacks have indeed been shot by police, more are involved in activities where a bad outcome is highly likely.

This whole sordid business of claiming ?over-representation? based strictly on the number of incidents versus the size of the particular population is completely bogus.

To illustrate how silly this ?over-representation? argument is, consider the fact that the inmates in Canada's penitentiaries, I dare say, are likely at least 90 per cent male. What does that mean? Should we free more men to even the playing field? Or, alternatively, should we send more women to jail? And does it mean that because more men are in jail the justice system is hopelessly biased against men?

The answers are obvious. More men end up in jail because they're more likely to be involved in crime than women are.

The same realities apply to the black and aboriginal communities. They're both more likely than white people to be involved in crime and, sadly, more likely to run afoul of the law.

But it shouldn't be about finger-pointing. If we really want to solve what is clearly a legitimate problem, let's ignore the partisan sloganeering and focus on trying to correct the basic conditions which make these unfortunate conditions a reality.

And the best place to start is to collect data on everything, regardless of whom it upsets.

