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Black & Global Majority Experiences of the London Court System

Prepared for MOPAC
By Black Men 4 Change

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CLiKS

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Executive Summary

This snapshot report presents six brief lived experience accounts of Black and Global Majority individuals navigating the London court system. Prepared for MOPAC as part of the London Judicial Ethnic Disproportionality Pilot, it documents how court processes were experienced by those directly affected.

Across magistrates' courts and Crown Courts, participants describe patterns that are consistent, not incidental. For many, the courtroom was not the beginning of their story but the continuation of earlier police contact and embedded assumptions. Accounts highlight inconsistent legal representation, plea decisions made under conditions of exhaustion or deprivation, shifting charges, racialised perception, and a courtroom culture experienced as procedural but indifferent to human consequence.

The cross-cutting themes are clear:

- **Continuity of Institutional Harm:** Courts were experienced as a continuation of earlier policing encounters rather than corrective spaces.
- **Decisions Made Under Duress:** Pleas were entered while participants were exhausted, deprived of medication, or held on remand due to administrative failures.
- **Representation Inequality:** Defendants who sourced their own legal aid solicitors described materially stronger advocacy than those assigned duty representation.
- **Racialised Perception:** Appearance and stereotype were perceived to shape how individuals were seen, irrespective of evidence.
- **Gendered and Racialised Disbelief:** Female participants described credibility as fragile and conditional, particularly when navigating the system as victims.
- **Workplace Disparities:** Disability accommodations within court workplaces were experienced as inconsistently applied across racial lines.





This report presents six lived experience accounts of Black and Global Majority individuals navigating the London court system. These are not abstract reflections on policy. They are personal accounts of arrest, custody, plea decisions, trial, sentencing, and workplace harm described by those who have lived through them.

Prepared for MOPAC as part of the London Judicial Ethnic Disproportionality Pilot, this report is written independently by Black Men 4 Change. Its purpose is not to defend institutional practice, nor to rehearse well-documented statistical disparities. It is to centre the voices of those who directly experience the system and to document how court processes are felt, understood, and remembered by the people most affected by them.

The recommendations included in this report are drawn directly from participant reflections. They are not institutional proposals authored by Black Men 4 Change. They represent the perspectives of those who have lived through the system and considered what must change as a result.

These accounts reinforce longstanding findings from inquiries and parliamentary scrutiny regarding racial disproportionality. What this report adds is contemporary lived evidence. The consistency of experience across age, role, and court type suggests structural issues rather than isolated failings.

The question is not whether reform is required. The testimony presented here makes that clear. The question is whether reform will be structural, visible, and accountable enough to alter lived experience. Several participants first encountered the justice system as children. Decades later, they describe patterns that remain recognisable. Without measurable change at the point of contact, the cycle described in this report will persist.

Introduction

For many participants, the court was not the beginning of their story; it was the continuation of patterns established long before they entered the courtroom. Across magistrates' courts and Crown Courts, participants describe patterns that extend beyond individual incidents: early police contact shaping later court outcomes, decisions made under exhaustion and fear, uneven quality of legal representation, shifting charges, racialised perception, and the cumulative impact of process experienced as cold, rushed, or indifferent.

The recommendations contained within this report are drawn directly from participants' reflections on what should change. They represent the views of those interviewed and are not institutional policy proposals from Black Men 4 Change. Our role has been to facilitate, document, and faithfully present their accounts.

We adopted a trauma-informed approach to interviews, recognising that participants were sharing experiences that were often emotionally demanding and, in some cases, deeply distressing. Professionals within the justice system are routinely paid to analyse their work; those who experience the system are rarely afforded the same recognition. Each account stands as an individual narrative whilst contributing to a broader understanding of how the London court system is experienced by Black and Global Majority communities.

Methodology

This project was undertaken by Black Men 4 Change as part of the London Judicial Ethnic Disproportionality Pilot.

- Six individuals were interviewed using a structured interview guide covering:
- Background and initial contact with the court system
- Court proceedings and key moments
- Interactions with legal representatives and court staff
- Sentencing and outcomes
- Personal impact and reflections

Participants represented a range of roles within the court system, including defendants, a victim, and a court employee. Interviews explored both procedural experience and emotional impact.

Trauma-Informed Approach

A trauma-informed framework guided the interview process. Participants were invited to share experiences that were often emotionally demanding, and interviews were conducted with sensitivity to distress, agency, and psychological safety. The intention was to create space for reflection without re-traumatisation.

Compensation and Ethical Participation

In accordance with guidance from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), participants were compensated for their contribution.

We provided £50 in cash for a 45-minute interview. Typical compensation ranges in comparable research contexts include:

- £20–£30 for short interviews (30–45 minutes)
- £40–£60 for 60–90 minutes
- £100+ for workshops or advisory roles

In community justice work, vouchers of £25–£50 are common. We opted for cash payments to support dignity and autonomy. This approach was adopted intentionally to minimise extractive practice. Research within the criminal justice field has historically been experienced as something done to Black communities rather than with them. We sought to model participatory integrity and respect.

Ethical and Practice Framework

No single best-practice framework exists within the criminal justice sector for lived experience participation. As such, we drew on a hybrid approach, including:

- CLINKS and Revolving Doors (participatory engagement principles)
- Ministry of Justice and HMPPS guidance (ethics and risk management)
- NIHR and UK Research & Innovation (structural participation and compensation standards)

All identifying details have been anonymised to protect participant privacy whilst preserving the authenticity of their experiences.

Position of Black Men 4 Change

Black Men 4 Change facilitated and documented these accounts independently. The recommendations included throughout the report are drawn directly from participant reflections. They represent the perspectives of those interviewed and should be understood as lived-experience recommendations rather than formal policy proposals authored by Black Men 4 Change.

LIVED EXPERIENCE ACCOUNT 1: Thomas, The Long Journey from Juvenile to Life Sentence

Context

Age: 45-54

Gender: Male

Race: Black British Caribbean

Court Type: Magistrates, Crown and Juvenile

Reason for Attending: Defendant

Outcome: Sentence

Legally Represented: Yes, Legal Aid





The Story

Thomas's first encounter with the court system through the police came at age 11, following the Tottenham Broadwater Farm riots. Until that point, he describes himself as a typical child, attending church and playing football. That first police encounter marked a turning point. What followed was a pattern of repeated stop and searches that gradually normalised his contact with the criminal justice system. By the time he appeared in juvenile magistrates' court, he was learning the process in real time. No one had explained his rights or what to expect. He was navigating proceedings as they unfolded, slowly and unwittingly becoming institutionalised within a system he did not yet understand.

Years later, when the murder case came, the evidence was not about Thomas. It was about his brother. Yet the prosecution repeatedly referred to "the brothers," linking them together in a way that made it difficult for the jury to see him as an individual. Witnesses claimed they had seen him during a period when he had actually been in custody for four years. Those claims forced him to disclose a previous conviction to the jury, placing him in an impossible position and shaping how he would be viewed. The trial was stopped two weeks in. The prosecution claimed to have evidence they did not want to disclose, and despite legal arguments that a sworn jury should only be discharged in the most serious circumstances, the judge dismissed them. A new trial date was set. At the retrial, Thomas was found guilty.

Halfway through the proceedings, armed police appeared in court, even though nothing had happened to warrant it. Strip searches became routine, based solely on police assumptions. The courtroom no longer felt like a place of justice; it felt like a continuation of the treatment he had experienced since childhood. Throughout the process, Thomas's solicitor, someone he had known since age 15, maintained regular communication, particularly with his mother. The defence team engaged with him, and he was able to send notes to his barrister with questions. However, the prosecution supported witness accounts that he maintains were untrue, building a narrative that conflated him with his brother despite inconsistencies in the evidence. Thomas continued to appeal for many years, from a conviction dating back to 1997 until 2010/2011. He believes the evidence demonstrated he had nothing to do with the case. But without what the courts considered "new evidence," the conviction stood. Eventually, he had no choice but to move forward, reading, educating himself, and establishing routine within a system that had shaped his life since he was 11 years old.

In Their Own Words

On First Encountering the System:

"Nothing apart from what the police said when you're in the police station... No one ever advised me or my mum... we learned as we went on to be honest."

During Court Proceedings:

"They kept on saying the Davidson brothers. So they kept on attaching my name to my brother. So that's how they got the joint enterprise...the evidence from their own witnesses says...they tried to lie and say they seen me at least once for the last 4 years and the judge and the prosecution already knew I was in custody for 4 years...They brought a lot of armed police into the courts halfway during the trial which wasn't needed because nothing was happening... then we started to get strip searched every time we go into the court based on whatever assumptions the police said"

On Legal Support:

"They communicated a lot with me... always ask questions. So make sure that we've got our case sorted out as much as possible...sometimes you could look back and say he could fight for me a bit more based on the case, but he still communicated a lot."

Looking Back:

"From the minute I'm age of 16 when I first entered the prison system and I'm now 51, 52, what's changed? There've been a load of racial race relations acts and all of these different things, different agencies coming into the prison system or to the court system analysing. There's not been no change because people still being affected just from the colour of their skin."

Key Themes

- **Institutional Continuity:** The court experience was viewed as an extension of police treatment that began in childhood, not a separated and therefore siloed series of experiences.
- **Joint Enterprise Injustice:** Being linked to a family member's actions despite lack of individual evidence created an impossible defence scenario.
- **Systemic Resignation:** Despite multiple appeals and clear evidence issues, changing the outcome proved impossible without new evidence the system wouldn't help uncover.

Recommendations for Change

- **Jury of Actual Peers:** Implement a jury system where defendants are judged by people who are truly their peers, not just theoretically. The current system claims everyone is a peer, but in practice, an all-white jury doesn't reflect the lived experience of Black defendants.
- **Judicial Accountability:** Judges should be scrutinised for their sentencing records the same way police officers are reprimanded for mistakes. There's never been accountability for judges who consistently give harsher sentences to Black people.
- **Representation in Leadership:** Increase ethnic minority representation in senior leadership positions across all areas of the justice system, Leadership and decision-making structures should better reflect the communities most impacted by the system.

LIVED EXPERIENCE ACCOUNT 2: Brian, Six Months Lost to Police Negligence

Context

Age: 35-44

Gender: Male

Race: Black British

Court Type: Magistrates, Crown

Reason for Attending: Defendant, Supporter

Outcome: Sentence, Case dismissed

Legally Represented: Yes, Legal Aid

The Story

The first time Brian went to court as a young person, it was "a bit of a blur." A solicitor gave him a brief description, but the legal jargon and rigid procedure meant he didn't fully grasp what was happening. In the courtroom, it was about formality, stating your plea, not explaining mitigating circumstances or your point of view. The duty solicitor provided by the police offered minimal support: just show up, state your name, we'll see about bail. No explanation of the bail process, no clarity on what guilty versus not guilty actually meant for his future, no discussion of defence strategy.

That pattern would repeat across multiple cases until Brian found his own solicitors through legal aid, ones he built rapport with, ones who cared about the outcome despite also being paid win or lose. The difference was stark: duty solicitors treated cases as just another day's work, whilst the solicitors he chose himself provided real advice, followed his instructions, and equipped him with knowledge about his rights. A probation officer helped him find better representation when she saw he wasn't getting proper legal support. But it was Brian's most recent case, his last time in custody, that revealed the system's deepest injustice. Someone made an allegation. That same person retracted their statement. The police ignored the retraction. When a judge was prepared to grant him bail at an address outside London, the police simply didn't bother to check the address. Without that verification, bail was denied. Six months in prison on remand. Time lost because the police couldn't be bothered to verify an address. Six months whilst knowing the allegation had been retracted. The police file claimed Brian had previously breached bail conditions, a lie. He'd been arrested whilst on bail, but those charges were dropped. The system didn't investigate enough to find the truth.

When he finally got to court, the case was "dashed out within 5 minutes", no case to answer. No evidence. No compensation for the six months stolen from his life. Brian lost his accommodation. He lost time with his son, arrested in front of him despite having shielded him from his past. He lost the opportunity to travel to Uganda for a significant project. He had to rebuild himself mentally and economically from the psychological damage. The courtroom itself felt cold, indifferent. Just another case in an overwhelmed system. Judges and magistrates seemed stereotypical, generalising, though he acknowledged one or two who looked deeper, who tried to understand the individual rather than just the case. But the prosecution focused on telling the best story, attacking personal character to fit their narrative, rather than presenting facts or truth. Brian couldn't even get a haircut in prison before his trial. The clothes he wore weren't his smartest ones. He knew how this played into the prosecution's image of a "young black boy, crazy looking afro", knew that his appearance influenced the jury's opinion despite it having nothing to do with the facts of the case.





In Their Own Words

On First Encountering the System:

"A lot of things were said in legal jargon which for a young person like myself wasn't familiar with... it's more formality than you going to court to express what happened from your point of view. You're kind of just being told this is what's happening. This is what you're accused of. How do you plead and that's it."

During Court Proceedings:

"You just feel like you're literally just another case... you don't feel nothing. What you feel like it's quite cold. It's very this is very just okay, this is it, I'm saying to you. Just it's another case. Get it done so we can get on to the next one."

On Legal Support:

"Most of the duty solicitors... they kind of get paid win or lose, so in terms of them being bothered or them caring about the case itself... duty solicitors don't care. They just show up because it's money for them either way, win or lose... [But] with certain solicitors I found myself and built a rapport with... I felt like I had support from them... ones that I found of my own accord, not the ones that have been provided by the government systems."

Looking Back:

"That was 6 months out of my life... to get released and just get dropped and there's no formal compensation, no nothing. It's just okay, yep, just get out of prison now... I was able to allow that situation to kind of go over me and not kind of stay inside me... on a personal level, it took a lot of mental rebuilding within myself."

Key Themes

- **Quality of Advocacy Over Funding Type:** Even within legal aid, self-sourced solicitors who the defendant built rapport with provided vastly superior representation compared to court-assigned duty solicitors, despite both being paid regardless of outcome.
- **Police Power Without Accountability:** Simple negligence (not checking a bail address) or false file information (claiming breached bail conditions) resulted in months of wrongful detention with no consequences or compensation.
- **Appearance as Evidence:** Being unable to access proper grooming or clothing whilst on remand directly contributed to negative jury perceptions unrelated to the facts of the case.

Recommendations for Change

- **Improved Communication:** Better explanation of the entire court process, including what bail means, how to get bail, what guilty versus not guilty actually entails, the trial process, and defence requirements. Legal jargon needs to be translated into plain language that people, particularly young people can understand.
- **Greater Voice for Defendants:** Allow defendants to express themselves more throughout the process, not just at sentencing. The impact of court decisions on people's lives warrants giving them more opportunity to be heard and to present who they are as individuals.
- **Balanced Character Evidence:** If prosecution can bring up bad character and past conduct to influence the jury, defendants should have equal right to present good character references during the defence phase, not just at sentencing after they've already been found guilty.
- **Prison System Redesign:** Rather than focusing solely on punishment and survival, adopt models like Scandinavian systems that emphasise rehabilitation and rejuvenation. Prepare first-time prisoners properly for what they'll experience, not what the media portrays. Current focus on survival leads to additional charges rather than reflection and growth.
- **Address the Culture:** The fundamental culture of courts needs to shift away from treating defendants as "just another case" to recognising the life-altering stakes and potential impact of every courtroom decision.

LIVED EXPERIENCE ACCOUNT 3:

David, Learning the System as You Go

Context

Age: 35–44

Gender: Male

Race: Black British Caribbean

Court Type: Crown

Reason for Attending: Defendant

Outcome: Custodial Sentence

Legally Represented: Yes, Legal Aid

The Story

David's story moves through two systems that most people never enter, and fewer still survive with their sense of self intact. He has lived inside both the mental health system and the prison system, carrying not only the weight of those experiences but a clear-eyed understanding of what institutional systems can do to people, and what it takes to come through them. When it came to legal preparation, David's solicitor and barrister prepared him well for the case itself, the arguments, the evidence, and what to expect from the prosecution. The communication was clear, calm, and professional. He felt respected, believed, and treated as though they were genuinely on his side. But the courtroom itself was a different matter. No one had explained what actually happened once he entered that room: the procedures, his rights as a defendant, or what each stage meant as it unfolded. He was prepared for the legal case, but not for the experience of being a defendant inside the courtroom itself. That gap left him learning the system in real time, while already inside it.

The treatment he received from court staff, security, ushers, and clerks varied. What stayed with David most was the reaction from some Black members of staff, whose visible disappointment carried a particular emotional weight. There seemed to be an unspoken expectation behind those looks, as though his presence reflected badly on the wider community. The assumptions came from all sides, but the disappointment from those who shared his background carried a different sting.

The sentence itself felt measured and could have been harsher. But comments made afterwards undermined that sense of fairness, leaving David feeling judged in ways that extended beyond the legal decision itself. What stayed with him was not simply the sentence, but a deeper question: what responsibility does the system carry towards the people it processes but never truly sees?

David reflected on the contrast between the mental health system, where professional conduct is inspected, monitored, and reviewed, and the criminal justice system, where he felt institutional practices often continued without meaningful accountability.

That gap between regulated professional oversight and unchallenged institutional behaviour struck him as one of the system's deepest failures. Yet his story does not end there. Today, David delivers presentations to both inmates and prison staff. Governors have specifically invited him to speak to their teams because burnout among staff is real. Many professionals who repeatedly see the same people return through the system begin to lose hope that change is possible. Hearing from someone who passed through both systems and returned not as a prisoner, but as a speaker and mentor, became a source of hope for both staff and inmates alike. That, David explained, is what makes his story different. Not simply that he survived those systems, but that he came back to speak honestly about them, which many people with similar experiences never do.

In Their Own Words

On First Encountering the System:

"My solicitor and barrister prepared me really well for the case itself. But in terms of what to expect in the courtroom, I had no understanding at all. No one explained my rights once I was in that room."

On Legal Support:

"The level of information was good, and the way they articulated it to me was good. They were calm, professional. I felt respected, like they were genuinely on my side. I felt very prepared for the case itself."

Looking Back:

"What I noticed was the Black members of staff, the ushers, the clerks who looked at me differently. It was quite judgey, kinda like they were... personally offended or disappointed that I would be there. That stayed with me."





Key Themes

- **Mental Health as Entry Point:** Being sectioned before entering the criminal justice system meant he arrived already carrying institutional labels and assumptions from one system into another.
- **Racialised Judgement from Within:** The visible disappointment from Black court staff carried a particular emotional weight, reflecting expectations and judgement that felt personal as well as institutional.
- **Post-Release Purpose:** Rather than leaving the experience behind, he returned as a voice for others navigating mental health challenges, using lived experience to support hope, reflection, and change.

Recommendations for Change

- **Professional Inspection and Accountability:** Create an independent inspection and accountability mechanism to monitor the treatment and experiences of defendants before, during, and after court proceedings. This should go beyond reporting alone and include meaningful oversight, feedback processes, and visible institutional accountability where harmful practices or patterns are identified.
- **Education, Rights Awareness, and Early Prevention:** Invest in early prevention by ensuring all young people understand their rights, legal processes, and available support before coming into contact with the criminal justice system. This should include challenging the early criminalisation and adultification of Black children and adopting more preventative, public health-informed approaches centred on early support and intervention.
- **Moving Beyond Reports Without Action:** Strengthen institutional accountability by ensuring that findings from inspections, reviews, and disproportionality reports lead to visible implementation, measurable change, and ongoing monitoring, rather than repeated documentation without clear action or consequence.

LIVED EXPERIENCE ACCOUNT 4:

Sandra, Pressured to Plead, Living with the Consequences

Context

Age: 55+

Gender: Female

Ethnicity: Black British

Court Type: Magistrates' Court

Reason for Attending: Defendant

Outcome: Financial penalty

Legally Represented: Yes, Legal Aid (Duty Solicitor)

The Story

Sandra had never been arrested before. Her first contact with the criminal justice system occurred while travelling with her children. Without clear explanation, she was removed from her vehicle, surrounded by police officers, and taken into custody without her belongings. She described the experience as frightening and disorientating, made worse by concern for her children and her lack of understanding of what was happening. At the police station, confusion escalated into fear. Sandra was subjected to repeated testing without clear explanations and denied access to basic needs, including the toilet and essential medication. Despite repeatedly stating that she had a medical condition, she described being held in a cold cell for an extended period, breathless, exhausted, and frightened. While she was being held, the nature of the charge itself changed. Sandra described how officers initially focused on one allegation, then reframed the charge while she remained in custody, without clear explanation or opportunity to challenge it. By the time she was taken to court, she felt she was responding to a different accusation than the one she believed she had been arrested for.

Sandra spent two nights and two days in custody. By the time she appeared in court, she had barely eaten, had no change of clothes, and had been without her medication. She described placing her coat over her head in the cell simply to escape the environment. She arrived at court physically depleted and emotionally overwhelmed. Sandra met the duty solicitor shortly before the hearing. The advice she received was blunt and binary: plead guilty and go home or plead not guilty and risk harsher punishment. She described knowing internally that she was not guilty but feeling unable to advocate for herself in that moment. Her guilty plea was not made with confidence or understanding, it was a survival response to prolonged fear, exhaustion, and distress. Once the plea was entered, the process moved quickly. The magistrates focused on paperwork and readings rather than her circumstances. Court staff were polite, but distant. No one checked whether she had understood her options or whether her decision had been made freely.

Although the immediate penalty was later adjusted due to time already spent in custody, the long-term consequences were severe. Sandra described ongoing trauma, disrupted sleep, fear of driving, and a deep loss of trust in the police. Professionally, the conviction affected her ability to work, ultimately leading her to resign and rely on benefits. She described feeling watched, unsafe, and permanently altered by the experience. What stayed with her most was the knowledge that a single decision, made under pressure, without rest, medication, or proper legal advice reshaped her life. The system, she concluded, failed at the moment when protection and clarity mattered most.

In Their Own Words

On First Encountering the System:

"I'd never been in trouble with the police before. I didn't understand what was happening."

"I spent two nights and two days hardly eating, without a change of clothes or my medication. A lot of the time I put my coat over my head to escape."

During Court Proceedings:

"I was exhausted. I was scared. I was worried about my children. I just wanted to go home."

On Legal Support:

He pushed me to plead guilty. He didn't really listen. It felt like he just wanted it over."

Looking Back:

"I regret pleading guilty. My body was saying not guilty, but I wasn't given the chance to pause."

Key Themes

- **Custody as Coercion:** Prolonged detention, deprivation, and fear created conditions where informed decision-making was impossible.
- **Shifting Charges and Uncertainty:** Changes to the basis of the charge while in custody undermined fairness and understanding.
- **Rushed Legal Advice:** Duty solicitor support prioritised speed and case closure over genuine representation.
- **Enduring Harm Beyond Sentence:** The most significant consequences were psychological, professional, and social.

Recommendations for Change

- **Mandatory Pause Before Pleas:** Introduce a compulsory reflection period before guilty pleas, particularly for first-time defendants and those held overnight or longer in custody.
- **Safeguards Around Charge Changes:** Any change to charges while a person is in custody must be clearly explained, documented, and legally reviewed.
- **Medical and Welfare Protections:** No one should appear in court without access to medication, food, rest, and basic dignity.
- **Independent Advocacy:** Defendants should have access to an independent advocate to explain rights and options outside court time pressures.
- **Independent Custody Oversight for Vulnerable Detainees:** Introduce automatic independent review when a detainee is held for more than 24 hours, particularly where medical conditions are declared. This review should confirm access to medication, legal advice, and clarity around charges.
- **Judicial Confirmation of Voluntariness:** Before accepting a guilty plea from a detained defendant, magistrates should be required to record explicit confirmation that the plea was entered freely, without coercion, and with full understanding of consequences.
- **Recorded Review of Amended Charges:** Where charges are amended while a person remains in custody, the court must formally document the reason, timing, and legal basis for that amendment to ensure transparency and prevent procedural manipulation.





LIVED EXPERIENCE ACCOUNT 5:

Remi, Believed Enough to Proceed, Not Enough to Protect

Context

Age: 35–44

Gender: Female

Race: Black British African

Court Type: Crown Court

Reason for Attending: Defendant and victim (separate cases)

Outcome: Community service in one case; not guilty verdict in the other

Legally Represented: Yes, Legal Aid (Both cases)

The Story

Remi entered the court system as a young adult with an understanding of law and procedure, having recently completed a law degree at the time of her first case. Despite this knowledge, she described the experience as rushed, intimidating, and emotionally isolating. As a defendant, Remi recalled being given information about likely outcomes and plea options but not being prepared for the reality of court. On the day itself, she felt alone and unsupported. The guilty plea she entered felt logical at the time, the option that promised a lighter sentence and quicker resolution rather than a decision made with confidence or calm reflection.

Remi's experience as a victim in a separate case was far more destabilising. She described inconsistent communication, changing legal representatives, and unclear timelines. Despite the seriousness of the offence and what she believed to be strong evidence, she felt disbelieved and dismissed. No one openly challenged her credibility, but she experienced a persistent undercurrent of doubt that left her feeling exposed and unsupported. The outcome of the victim case devastated her. Remi required counselling and described a prolonged period of emotional recovery. Over time, and particularly through conversations with friends working in policing, she came to believe that she had been treated unfairly. While she did not experience overt verbal discrimination, she questioned whether her race shaped how her account was received and valued. Looking back, Remi reflected that if someone with legal training could feel this unsupported, the system must be significantly more harmful for those entering without knowledge, confidence, or advocacy.

In Their Own Words

On First Encountering the System:

"It felt very rushed. I didn't feel particularly prepared. It was nerve-wracking."

On Plea Decisions:

"The guilty plea made sense at the time because of a lighter sentence. I was young, anxious, and nervous, so I went with that option. If it happened now, I might choose differently."

During Court Proceedings:

"The environment felt tense and intimidating from the moment you walked in."

On Legal Support:

"I don't remember anyone representing me on the day. I felt alone."

Looking Back:

"Looking back now, especially with what I know through friends working in policing, I believe I was treated unfairly. I didn't feel believed, and that was deeply disheartening. I wasn't verbally discriminated against, but I do think I might have been treated differently if I were another race."

Key Themes

- **Procedural Justice Without Care:** Processes functioned, but emotional safety and reassurance were absent.
- **Gendered and Racialised Disbelief:** Credibility as a victim felt fragile and conditional.
- **Isolation Within the System:** Lack of continuity and visible support intensified harm.

Recommendations for Change

- **Procedural Justice Without Care:** Processes functioned, but emotional safety and reassurance were absent.
- **Gendered and Racialised Disbelief:** Credibility as a victim felt fragile and conditional.
- **Isolation Within the System:** Lack of continuity and visible support intensified harm.
- **Procedural Justice Without Care:** Processes functioned, but emotional safety and reassurance were absent.
- **Gendered and Racialised Disbelief:** Credibility as a victim felt fragile and conditional.
- **Isolation Within the System:** Lack of continuity and visible support intensified harm.

LIVED EXPERIENCE ACCOUNT 6:

Winsome, Working Inside the System, Harmed by It

Context

Age: 55+

Gender: Female

Race: Black British

Court Type: Magistrates' Court (workplace setting)

Reason for Attending: Court employee

Outcome: Not applicable

Legally Represented: Not applicable

The Story

Winsome's experience of the court system came not as a defendant, but as someone working within it. After becoming disabled and transitioning to wheelchair use, she entered a prolonged period of vulnerability: learning how to navigate transport, access support, and remain in employment. At the moment she most needed institutional protection, she experienced sustained neglect. Travelling to work by public transport became a daily physical and emotional challenge. Inaccessible buses, queues, weather, and breakdowns meant she often arrived late, soaked through by rain or frozen in winter. Rather than being met with understanding, Winsome was told this time would be deducted from her lunch break. To compensate, she regularly worked late into the evening, travelling home in the dark simply to avoid disciplinary action.

Inside the building, physical barriers compounded the harm. Heavy doors caused pain and injury. Accessible toilets were unreliable and sometimes shared with the public, leaving them unsanitary or unavailable. On some days, she avoided eating or drinking because she could not safely use the toilet. She described this as deeply demoralising and degrading. Winsome observed stark differences in how disability support was applied. White colleagues with disabilities were allocated regular time off, proactively supported by management, and had transport and adjustments arranged through the Access to Work scheme. In contrast, Winsome had to independently research her rights, initially self-fund transport, and repeatedly justify her needs. Support that was automatic for others was conditional for her.

Despite this, she remained competent and innovative, improving systems and supporting colleagues across departments. Yet she felt her labour was extracted without recognition or care. The court relied on her skills while denying her dignity. Winsome's survival came not from the institution, but from community, union advocacy, public kindness, and personal resilience.





In Their Own Words

On Travelling to Work:

"Sometimes I'd arrive frozen or soaking wet and ask for a few minutes to collect myself, and I was told it had to come out of my lunch break. To make it up, I ended up working late most nights."

On Dignity and Facilities:

"It was demoralising and degrading, not knowing if I could use the toilet, sometimes having accidents, sometimes having to leave the building entirely and go to Macdonalds to use the toilet."

Looking Back:

"They wanted my skills, but they didn't value me as a person."

Key Themes

- **Institutional Neglect:** Accessibility and wellbeing were consistently deprioritised.
- **Unequal Disability Support:** White colleagues received proactive support, while the participant had to self-advocate and endure degrading conditions.
- **Survival Outside the System:** Healing and protection came from the community, not the institution.

Recommendations for Change

- **Mandatory Disability and Anti-Racism Training:** Regular, enforced training for all court staff, not optional or symbolic.
- **Independent Workplace Oversight:** Safe mechanisms for reporting racism and disability discrimination without fear of retaliation.
- **Equitable Application of Access Schemes:** Ensure disability support schemes are applied consistently and fairly across all staff.
- **Annual Racial Equity Audit of Workplace Adjustments:** Conduct mandatory annual audits reviewing how disability accommodations and Access to Work schemes are applied across racial groups, with findings reported publicly.
- **Executive-Level Accountability:** Assign named senior leaders responsibility for addressing racial and disability disparities within court workplaces, with performance measures tied to equity outcomes.
- **Strengthened Independent Reporting Mechanisms:** Review and strengthen existing whistleblowing frameworks to ensure independence from line management, guaranteed protection from retaliation, and transparent reporting of outcomes in cases involving racial or disability discrimination.

Conclusion: Cross-Cutting Themes

Across these six lived experience accounts, several powerful themes emerge about Black and Global Majority experiences in the London court system. These themes cut across gender, age, court type, and role, affecting defendants, victims, and even those employed within the system itself.

The Continuum of Institutional Harm

For participants who entered the system as defendants, courts did not exist in isolation. They were extensions of earlier encounters with police that often began in childhood. First contact came as early as age 10-11, establishing patterns of assumption and treatment that courts later reinforced rather than corrected. The idea that courts represent a neutral space for justice rang hollow when police intelligence, police negligence, and police assumptions directly shaped courtroom outcomes without challenge or accountability.

Coercion Through Deprivation

Multiple participants described making critical decisions, guilty pleas that would alter their lives, whilst in states of extreme physical and psychological depletion. One spent two nights in custody without medication, proper food, or rest before being advised to plead guilty. Another was held for six months on remand because police didn't verify a bail address, despite the original allegation being retracted. These were not isolated incidents of individual cruelty but structural features: the system uses custody conditions to extract compliance rather than ensure informed decision-making.

The Duty Solicitor Lottery

Even within legal aid, quality of representation varied drastically. Court-assigned duty solicitors were described as transactional, offering minimal support and prioritising case closure over genuine advocacy. In contrast, self-sourced legal aid solicitors, despite being paid through the same system, provided meaningful advice, built rapport, and equipped defendants with knowledge of their rights. The difference wasn't funding; it was whether the defendant had agency in choosing their representation or simply received whoever was assigned.

Shifting Grounds and Moving Targets

Charges changed whilst people remained in custody without clear explanation. Joint enterprise cases conflated family members, making individual guilt impossible to establish. Police files contained demonstrable lies (claiming breached bail when charges had been dropped) that went unchallenged. Witnesses lied under oath with prosecutorial support, forcing defendants to disclose previous convictions just to prove the witnesses couldn't have seen them when claimed. The goalposts moved constantly, always in the prosecution's favour.

Gendered and Racialised Disbelief

For women who entered the system as victims, credibility felt fragile and conditional. Despite strong evidence and the legal training to understand the process, one participant described an undercurrent of doubt that left her feeling exposed and dismissed. No one openly challenged her account, yet she emerged devastated, requiring counselling, convinced through later conversations with police officers that she had been treated unfairly. The system functioned procedurally whilst failing fundamentally to provide care, continuity, or genuine belief.

Appearance as Character Evidence

Being unable to access haircuts, appropriate clothing, or basic grooming whilst on remand directly influenced jury perceptions. Participants understood how they were seen, "young Black boy, crazy looking afro", and knew these visual assumptions shaped outcomes despite having nothing to do with facts or evidence. The prosecution weaponised appearance, constructing narratives of character through imagery that defendants in custody could not control.

The Coldness of Process

Across roles and court types, participants described the system as "cold," "indifferent," "rushed." People were processed rather than heard. Defendants felt like "just another case" in an overwhelmed system. Even those with legal training felt unprepared for the emotional reality of court. The machinery functioned, but human dignity was peripheral at best.





Institutional Hypocrisy on Disability and Race

For the participant who worked within the court system, disability support revealed stark racial disparities. White colleagues received proactive accommodations, time off, transport arrangements, Access to Work schemes applied automatically. She had to research her own rights, self-fund transport initially, and repeatedly justify basic needs. The institution extracted her labour and innovation whilst denying her dignity, relying on her skills without valuing her as a person. Heavy doors caused physical injury. Accessible toilets were unreliable, sometimes forcing her to leave the building entirely or risk accidents. Support that was automatic for white disabled colleagues was conditional for her.

Systemic Stagnation

The most devastating theme was this: nothing has changed. From participants now in their 50s who first entered the system in their teens to those currently navigating it, the pattern persists. Different reports get written, different agencies inspect, different race related acts pass. But Black and Global Majority people continue to be affected "just from the colour of their skin." Appeals spanning over a decade change nothing without new evidence the system won't help uncover. Complaints about racism or discrimination within the workplace go unaddressed. The machinery continues, indifferent to decades of documented harm.

Final Reflections

These six lived experience accounts reveal patterns that extend beyond isolated incidents. While each narrative is distinct, together they describe a system experienced as inconsistent, fragmented, and often indifferent to the human stakes involved. Participants describe courts not as neutral spaces correcting earlier harms, but as extensions of processes that began long before the courtroom. Early police contact, assumptions embedded in files, shifting charges, uneven legal advocacy, and conditions of custody all shaped courtroom outcomes. For some, the decisive moment was not the verdict itself, but the conditions under which key decisions were made: exhausted, fearful, inadequately advised, or deprived of medication and rest. The structural picture that emerges is not one of individual misconduct alone, but of dispersed accountability. Oversight mechanisms exist, yet participants experience little visible consequence when errors occur. Reports are written. Reviews are conducted. Guidance is updated. However, across decades from participants now in their 50s to those navigating the system today, lived experience suggests limited structural shifts in how Black and Global Majority individuals experience courts.

This report does not argue for the erosion of judicial independence, nor does it call for a single regulator. The constitutional complexity of the court system is recognised. However, the current model of fragmented independence where responsibility is distributed across agencies without coherent, transparent accountability appears, from participant perspective, to generate variability that feels arbitrary and, too often, racially stratified. Reform efforts focused on efficiency, digitisation, backlog reduction, and guideline adjustment may improve administrative performance. Yet participants describe something deeper: a deficit of trust, consistency, and perceived fairness. Courts may deliver procedural justice, but process alone does not guarantee legitimacy in the eyes of those most affected.

The recommendations presented throughout this report are drawn directly from participant reflections. They call for juries that reflect lived realities, safeguards around plea decisions made under duress, greater transparency in case handling, equitable application of disability support, meaningful inspection with consequence, and preventative education before first system contact. Whether or not each proposal is adopted in its current form, the direction of travel they signal is consistent: accountability, clarity, dignity, and prevention. These accounts do not stand alone. They sit within a long lineage of inquiries, reviews, and parliamentary scrutiny regarding racial disproportionality in the justice system. What this report contributes is contemporary lived texture: the emotional, psychological, and practical realities behind statistical disparity.

This report does not seek to indict individuals. It seeks to illuminate patterns described consistently by those who have navigated the system from positions of vulnerability. The question is not whether reform is needed. These accounts, alongside decades of inquiry, inspection, and parliamentary scrutiny make that beyond dispute. The question is whether reform will be structural enough, visible enough, and timely enough to change lived experience. Several participants first encountered the justice system as children. Decades later, they describe patterns that feel materially unchanged. If reform remains procedural rather than structural, the cycle described in these accounts will not be interrupted, it will be inherited.

About This Project

This pilot was undertaken independently and part sponsored by Black Men 4 Change as part of the London Judicial Ethnic Disproportionality Pilot commissioned by MOPAC. Its purpose was to respectfully centre and document the lived experiences of Black and Global Majority individuals navigating the London court system. Through structured, trauma-informed interviews, participants reflected on their journeys from initial police contact and court appearance through to sentencing, appeal, or workplace experience. The focus was not on abstract policy critique, but on how court processes are experienced in practice by those directly affected. All identifying details have been anonymised to protect participant privacy whilst preserving the integrity and authenticity of their accounts, it is a small report but no less insightful for it.



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