The criminalization of Māori and Pacific Islanders under the Domestic Violence Act 1995

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Abstract: Convictions for domestic violence offences are very high for both Māori and Pacific Islanders. Compared with Pākehā the rate of convictions for Māori are about 10 times higher and for Pacific Islanders about 4 times higher. Any judicial system that achieves such excessively high conviction rates against any minority ethnic group as compared with the majority must be viewed with a degree of suspicion. Specific sentences of Māori and Pacific Islanders for their convictions also run exceptionally high compared with Pākehā. For example, the custodial sentences handed down to Māori run about 15 to 18 times higher than Pākehā when considered per unit of ethnic population and about 3.5 times higher for Pacific Islanders. Other forms of sentencing also run exceptionally high for both ethnicities. These data suggest that either both Māori and Pacific Islanders are much more violent than Pākehā, or there is a bias against Māori and Pacific Islanders within the judiciary and police systems of New Zealand.

Keywords: conviction rates; criminalization; custodial sentencing; Māori domestic violence; Pacific Islanders domestic violence; racial discrimination; sentencing rates; violent crimes

Introduction

Up until the early 1980s the domestic violence scene in New Zealand was heavily biased against women. Corrections to this bias were made through the introduction of new legislation that brought greater understanding and indeed greater justice to the matter (Hook 2009a,b). In this essay, evidence is presented to suggest that domestic violence under the current judiciary may still be biased; but this time against Māori males. This is not to say that those convicted under the Domestic Violence Act are innocent of all charges made against them; rather, the position taken is that a bias could exist within the judiciary that leads to higher conviction rates and harsher sentencing for Māori males as compared with Pākehā.

Domestic violence in New Zealand

Passage of the Domestic Protection Act, (1982) by the New Zealand Government brought about radical changes to the way in which domestic violence was perceived not only by the general public but also by the courts and the police. The move from a position where acts of domestic violence were considered by the courts and police to be private family affairs, to one where the family was itself subject to intervention was a long hard awakening. In a system run mostly by male chauvinists who viewed women as chattels the change required substantial re-education both for the police and for the courts. The published comments of male judges and lawyers are classics of the times (Barwick, Gray & Macky, 2000; Seuffert, 1996). Particularly memorable were the following comments by a Pākehā woman as published in a process evaluation of the Domestic Violence Act (1995):

> His lawyer kept filing late affidavits that I couldn't respond to. The judge's behaviour was diabolical. He couldn't decide whether my husband's pinching and choking me were moments of intimacy or violence! He said I was excitable, emotional and that parts of my evidence were exaggerated. I was in the witness box for two hours. I

> wanted the order left in place till the property was settled but he discharged it. (Barwick, Gray, & Macky, 2000, p. 75)

Thus the period leading up to the Domestic Violence Act (1995) was a period of learning and re-education for the police and the courts, which might have contributed to the almost exponential increase in the number of convictions for male assaults on females (Hook, 2009a,b) over the 16 year period from 1980 to 1995. It is possible that as the courts began to understand more clearly their responsibilities towards women the conviction rates for males of all ethnicities increased accordingly.

In 1995 the conviction rates for Māori and Pākehā for domestic violence began to fall away quite dramatically (Hook, 2009a,b). The only significant domestic violence legislation to be passed at that time was the Domestic Violence Act of 1995, although it did not become effective until July 1, 1996. The precise reasons for this falling-off of conviction rates for both Māori and Pākehā have not been identified, but it seems likely that this remarkable change arose from the advent of the Domestic Violence Act of 1995 (Hook, 2009a,b), and the preliminary response was due to anticipatory activities on the part of the judiciary. The fall-off in conviction rates continued until around 2002 whereupon it began to climb again (Hook, 2009a,b).

It is unlikely that changes in the law brought about by new legislation triggered any changes in the rates of actual violence, but instead brought about changes in how the law perceived those acts and how the law chose to deal with them (Hook 2009a,b). Thus the temporal changes observed in the conviction rates for domestic violence, probably tells more about the police and judiciary than the offenders themselves.

While the fall-off in conviction rates that began around 1995 appeared to be due to the new legislation, and while the reduction in conviction rates was welcome, Māori and Pākehā did not seem to benefit equally. The fall-off for Pākehā appeared to exceed that of Māori leaving Māori with conviction rates now substantially in excess of Pākehā. In view of the fact that Māori accounted for less that 15% of the total population of New Zealand, who now, in absolute terms, exceeded the conviction rates for Pākehā the differential between the two groups was alarming (Hook, 2009a,b). Such changes in trends could be accounted for only by either marked changes in the propensity for violence by Māori or marked changes in the manner in which the offenders are dealt with by the courts and the police; of the two possibilities, nature or judiciary, the more likely is the latter.

The criminality of ethnic minorities

The criminality of ethnic minorities is a topic of concern around the world especially in the area of domestic violence (Collins, 2005; Goodman & Ruggiero, 2008; Hunter & Dantzker, 2005; Rasche, 1988). Explanations for the high rates of criminal convictions for minorities as compared with those of mainstream range from poverty and social deprivation to family instability (Goodman & Ruggiero, 2008; Collins, 2005; Flowers, 1990; Hunter & Dantzker, 2005) and some have even suggested that the criminality of Māori resides within his very nature (Hook, 2009c). Certainly there appears to be a relationship between deprivation in its various forms and criminality since the overwhelming number of crimes committed, reside with those at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder (Goodman & Ruggiero, 2008). However, that is not the total picture especially when it comes to crimes committed by ethnic minorities since they are often the target of cultural prejudice. Cultural prejudice can lead to criminalisation of minorities (see for example, Goodman & Ruggiero, 2008; Bull, 2004) especially when that prejudice resides within the judiciary itself.

There is a perception held by the general public that Māori and Pacific Islanders are responsible for most of the crimes perpetrated on the streets of New Zealand as well as in the homes today. This assertion is reflected in the number of Māori and Pacific Islanders in jail and in the manner in which newspapers report crimes in New Zealand. Violence committed by Māori and Pacific Islanders often becomes touted by the majority as evidence of their moral superiority. The truth of this assertion must be questioned, but more importantly the source of that assertion should be identified. Why is the idea of ethnic criminality embedded in the minds of New Zealanders in such a way that even Māori have come to believe it? While it must be accepted that Māori represent the majority of jailed inmates, one must also question how they actually got there and ask whether or not a process of minority criminalisation by mainstream is part of the overall picture.

This essay concerns the social forces that lead to Māori being convicted for acts of domestic violence at rates that far exceed that of Pākehā. While few would question the often expressed impression that Māori males have a tendency towards violence (Hook, 2009c), one has to look very carefully as to the source of those impressions. Truth has often been obscured by the wishful thinking of majorities with an agenda.

Discrimination and the measure of domestic violence

In this essay the word "discrimination" is used advisedly to mean the unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice. This is the definition as it appears in the online dictionary and thesaurus known as the Visual Thesaurus (2009).

In this and previous studies (Hook, 2009a,b) male assaults on females has been used as a measure of domestic violence in New Zealand. The primary reason for its use in this manner is because it is a reasonably objective quantitative assessment by the court system regarding the innocence or guilt of the perpetrators. However, the definition fails to take into account other aspects of domestic violence such as threats, assaults on children, and the psychological aspects of domestic violence; these other aspects are either not measured or if measured their contribution to the overall scene of domestic violence is relatively small. For example, assaults on children accounted for 5.0% of the total convictions for domestic violence in 1995. The corresponding figure for 2006 is 5.4%. Although this aspect of domestic violence is particularly heinous, these data have been excluded from the present study because they make up a relatively small percentage of the total domestic violence scene.

The definition for domestic violence used here is that which is given within the Domestic Violence Act (1995). This definition has been discussed at length previously (Hook, 2009a,b), and will not be further elaborated upon. However, for the purposes of this research I have limited it to male assaults on females for the reasons discussed above. The data was obtained from the Statistics New Zealand database on crime (Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

Sentencing under the Acts

The sentencing of men convicted for male assaults on females under the Domestic Protection Act (1982) and the Domestic Violence Act (1995) consisted of and consists of the following classifications (see Sentencing Types, 2008):

- Custodial sentences including home detention, preventative detention, imprisonment, and corrective training.

- Community-based sentences, consisting of community detention, community work, intensive supervision, supervision or probation, periodic detention, community service, and community programs, service sentences.
- Monetary penalties consisting of fines and reparation.
- Other – includes driver disqualification, or orders for treatment or care of the offender in a psychiatric hospital or secure facility or deportation orders.
- Convicted and discharged.

In general terms these categories are fixed although the fine details, such as what constitutes community-based sentences continues to evolve as new legislation comes on-line supplanting the old. Of these sentencing options the most onerous are those involving loss of freedom. Custodial sentences include incarceration as well as home and preventative detention, and as such are the most punitive in terms of their effects on the individual.

The classifications listed above have undergone a variety of changes under the Criminal Justice Act 1984, the Criminal Justice Act 1985, the Sentencing Act 2002, and the Criminal Procedure (Mentally Impaired persons) Act 2003, (Sentencing Legislation, 2008), and it is quite likely that any or all of these acts may have influenced the type of sentences recommended or favoured within the courts for particular acts of domestic violence.

In 1980, community-based sentences accounted for around 29 to 38% of all sentences imposed but by 1995 had increased to around 65 to 74% for all three ethnicities (Table 1). It seems quite likely that these changes reflect recommendations under the Acts regarding sentencing options as the law continues to refine itself.

Custodial sentences for Pākehā and Pacific Islanders appear similar accounting for 8 to 13% of all sentences imposed. However, custodial sentences imposed on Māori offenders are substantially higher than that of either Pākehā or Pacific Islanders accounting for between 15 and 22% of all sentences. Why Māori custodial sentences are higher than either Pākehā or Pacific Islanders is not apparent since there is nothing in the law that says Māori shall receive custodial sentences at a higher rate than any other ethnicity.

Table 1. Comparison in the Sentencing Profiles of 1980, 1995, and 2007 for Pākehā, Māori, and Pacific Islanders *

Ethnicity	Pākehā			Māori			Pacific Islander		
Year	1980	1995	2007	1980	1995	2007	1980	1995	2007
Custodial (including home detention)	9%	8%	11%	22%	15%	18%	11%	7%	13%
Community Service	31	65	55	29	70	62	38	74	60
Monetary (fines)	41	15	14	35	8	6	40	6	4
Other	15	10	17	13	6	11	9	9	18
Convicted and discharged	4	3	4	2	2	2	2	4	5
Total sentences	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

* Data from Statistics New Zealand, 2008

Over the period of 1980 to 2007 the sentences handed down to Pākehā for male assaults on females in the criminal courts of New Zealand is shown in Figure 1. The total sentences handed down rose almost exponentially from 1980 to 1995 and thereafter declined until around 2002 whereafter it began to increase again yearly until 2007. The major changes in the sentencing rates appears to coincide with three major Acts, these being the Domestic Protection Act of 1982, the Domestic Violence Act of 1995, and the Sentencing Act of 2002 (Hook, 2009b).

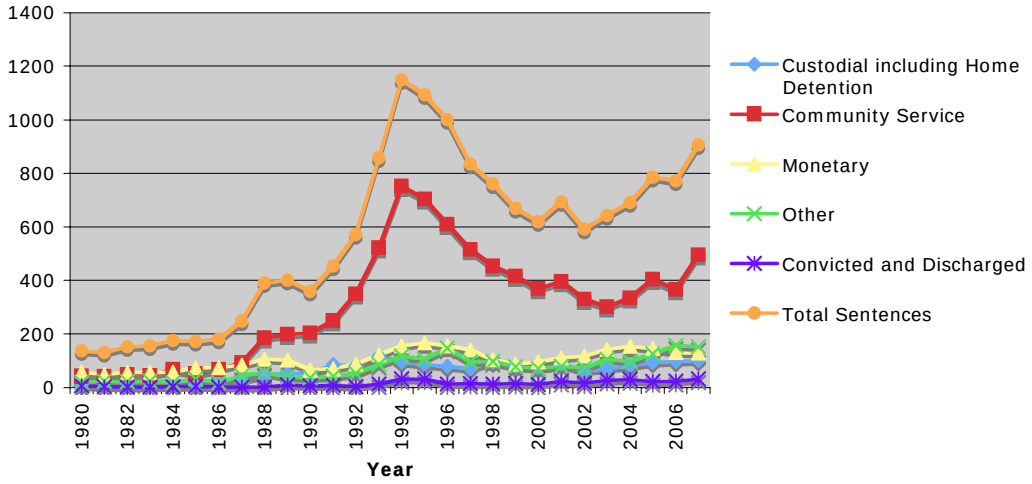


Figure 1. The sentencing of Pākehā for male assaults on females during the period 1980 to 2007. (Data from Statistics New Zealand, 2008)

The rise in convictions that occurred from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s has been attributed to the advent of the Domestic Protection Act 1982, and the changes needed in both understanding and attitudes with regard to domestic violence (Hook, 2009b). The change in trend that was first seen in 1995 has been attributed to the advent of the Domestic Violence Act 1995; however, it must be recognized that the Domestic Violence Act did not come into law until July 1, 1996 and, therefore, the fall-off in 1995 could be attributed to anticipation of the Act or something else altogether. In the absence of the something else and the degree of specificity of the Domestic Violence Act with regard to its effects on criminal activity (Hook, 2009b), the influence of the Domestic Violence Act 1995 is probably the correct interpretation.

For Pākehā the major sentence imposed is that of community service where yearly variations closely resemble that of the total sentences imposed. Other sentencing options such as monetary fines, custodial sentences, convictions and discharge are relatively small compared with the imposition of community-based sentences.

The sentencing of Māori offenders shows a similar pattern to that of Pākehā (Figure 2), excepting the absolute number of convictions is higher than that of Pākehā. As with Pākehā community-based sentences make up the bulk of all sentences.

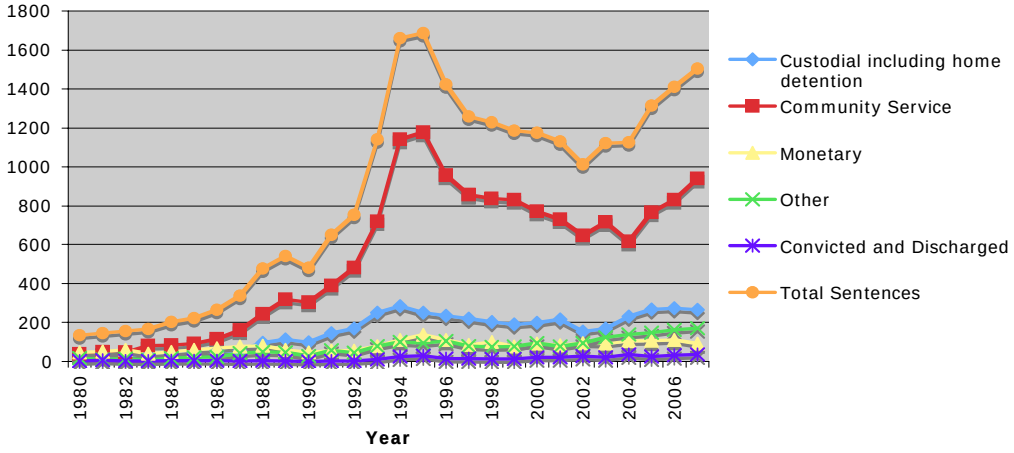


Figure 2. The sentencing of Māori for male assaults on females during the period 1980 to 2007. (Data from Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

The sentencing of Pacific Islander offenders shows a similar pattern to that of Pākehā and Māori (Figure 3), excepting the absolute number of convictions is substantially lower than that of either Pākehā or Māori.

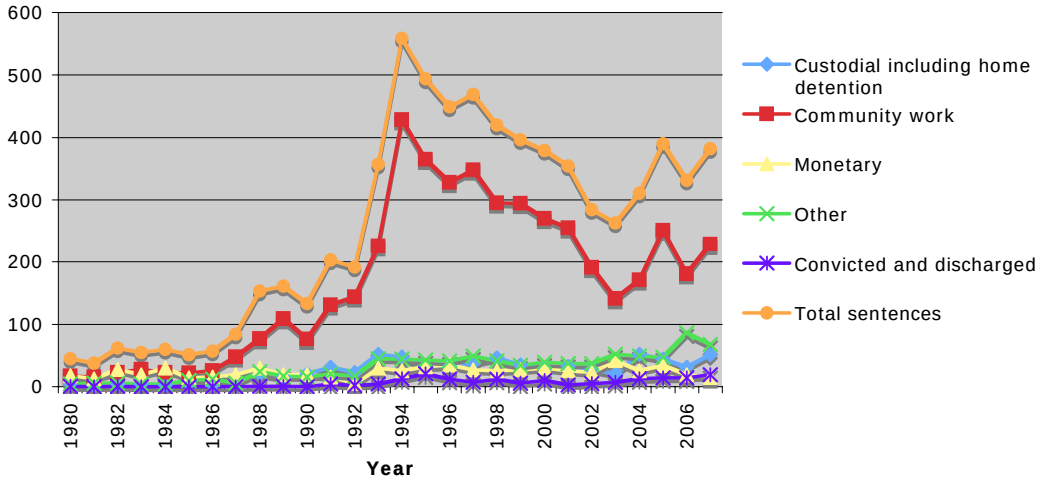


Figure 3. The sentencing of Pacific Islanders for male assaults on females during the period 1980 to 2007. (Data from Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

Over the period of 1980 to 2007, while the variety of sentences imposed have not changed the relative proportion of what is handed down has changed to a degree. Between 1980 and 2007 most sentences imposed were of the community-based variety.

Sentencing rates

The sentencing rate Re for a given ethnic population relative to that of Pākehā is calculated from the following equation:

$$Re = (Se/Sp).(P/E) \quad \ldots\ldots (1)$$

Where:

Se = the total sentences of a specific type handed down to ethnics (either Māori or Pacific Islander).

Sp = the total sentences of the same specific type handed down to Pākehā.

E = the total population of ethnics in New Zealand (in the cases studied here either Māori or Pacific Islander).

P = the total population of Pākehā.

The sentencing rate is the number of sentences of a specific kind handed down to ethnics per unit of ethnic population divided by the number of specific sentences handed down to Pākehā per unit of Pākehā population. It measures the relative propensity of the courts to impose specific kinds of sentencing on either Māori or Pacific Islanders as compared with Pākehā. For example, in 1997 (Figure 4A) the number of custodial sentences handed down to Māori for male assaults on females per 100,000 Māori (or per unit of Māori population) was 18.5 times higher than the number of custodial sentences handed down to Pākehā (or per unit of Pākehā population). In 2007 the rate for Māori was around 15 times that of Pākehā.

The history of custodial sentences over the period 1991 to 2007 shows that this ratio of sentencing Māori relative to sentencing Pākehā has been consistently high throughout the period studied (Figure 4A) ranging from 11 in 1991 to 18.5 in 1997 to 15 in 2007. The questions are whether or not such a disparity between Māori and Pākehā should exist, and exactly what is responsible for it?

Such a disparity could arise from Māori being substantially more violent than Pākehā or it could arise from the Pākehā dominated court system treating Māori differently from Pākehā; that is, a bias could exist within the court system that leads to a higher proportion of Māori being given custodial sentences. If such a bias exists then it must be hidden because Māori and Pākehā are supposed to be equal under the laws of New Zealand.

It is also true that the total conviction rates in terms of unit ethnic population for Māori exceed those of Pākehā (Figure 4A). The number of convictions of Māori per unit of Māori population runs from 8 to 11 times that of Pākehā per unit of Pākehā population (Figure 4A) which again demands a reason. Is the propensity to domestic violence really 8 to 10 times higher than that of Pākehā or is the court system and/or the police biased against Māori males?

While conviction rates are a combination of offences committed, police action and court actions and are therefore difficult to tease apart, the sentencing portion, however, resides entirely at the feet of the court system. Could the 1997 18-fold higher propensity of the court to impose custodial sentences on Māori versus Pākehā for domestic violence violations be attributed to a major bias against Māori within the court system itself? If true, it would then lead to the possibility that the courts are also biased when it comes to convicting Māori for domestic violence violations thus bringing to question the validity of a 10-fold greater conviction rate of Māori in terms of per unit population.

The use of statistical data to identify bias and discriminatory action of the New Zealand judiciary against Māori has not been reported previously, but the data speaks for itself. Any judicial system that achieves such excessively high conviction rates against any minority ethnic group as compared with the majority must be viewed with suspicion.

The sentencing of Māori to community service over the period studied ranges from around 8.4 times that of Pākehā in 1991 to 13.3 in 2003 to 10.6 times in 2007 (Figure 4B). While the sentencing of Māori to community service is far higher than that of Pākehā it reflects more closely the history concerning the excessive total convictions of Maori for male assaults on females (Figure 4A). The rate at which monetary fines are imposed on Māori and the rates at which offenders are convicted and discharged show lower trends than the total conviction rates over the period studied suggesting an easing perhaps in these two categories as compared with Pākehā. One might expect these ratios to reflect the ratios of the total conviction rates but instead the excess over Pākehā runs generally from 4 to 6 times. The imposition of monetary fines on Māori has been consistently around the 4 times that of Pākehā over the period studied.

Figure 4A

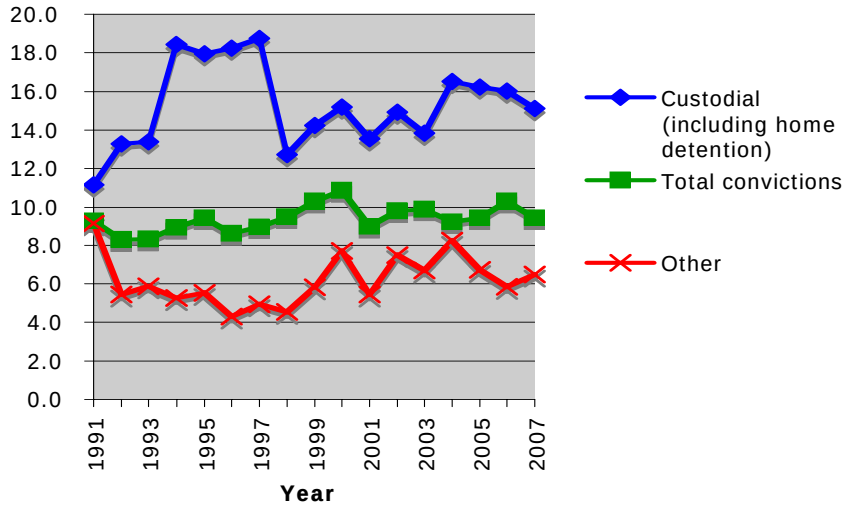
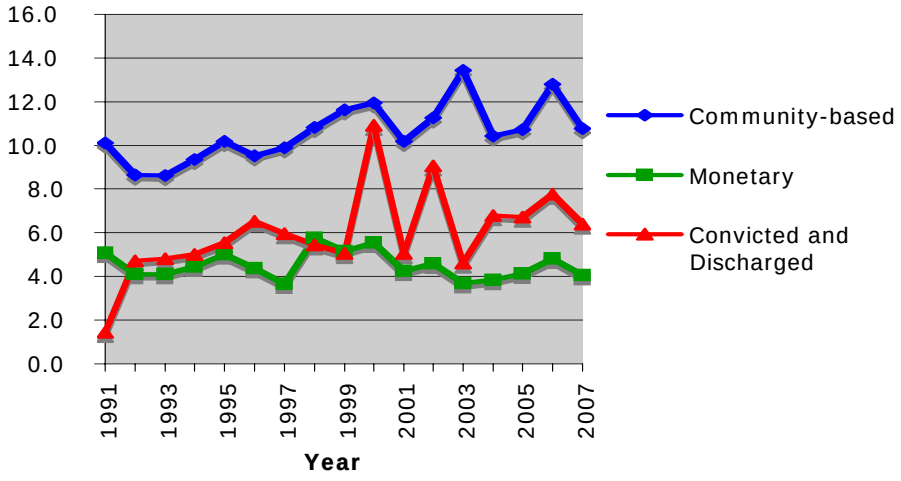


Figure 4B



Figures 4A and 4B. Sentencing rates of Māori per unit of ethnic population versus Pākehā. (Data from Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

Pacific Islander sentencing rates

The conviction rates of Pacific Islanders relative to Pākehā over the period 1991 to 2007 are shown in Figure 5A. Although the ratios vary considerably between 2.8 in 1991 to 3.5 in 2000 to 2.4 in 2007, Pacific Islanders are fined at a rate similar to that of Pākehā, convicted and discharged at a rate around three times that of Pākehā and committed to community service at a rate about three times that of Pākehā.

Figure 5A

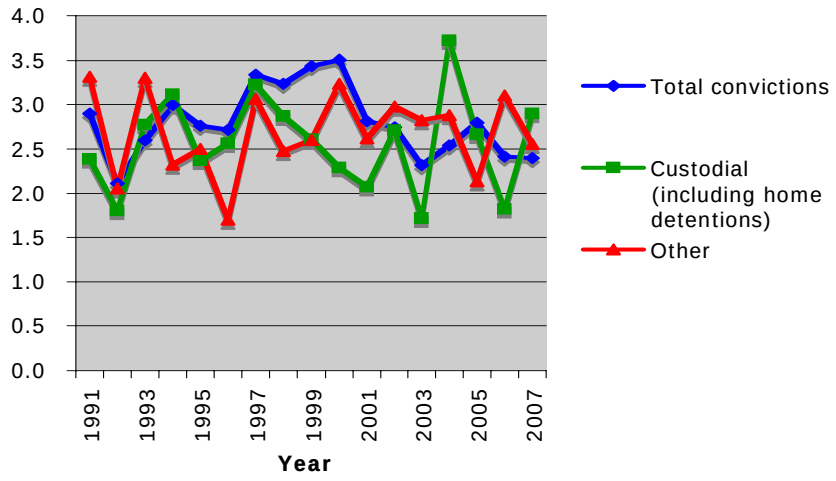


Figure 5B

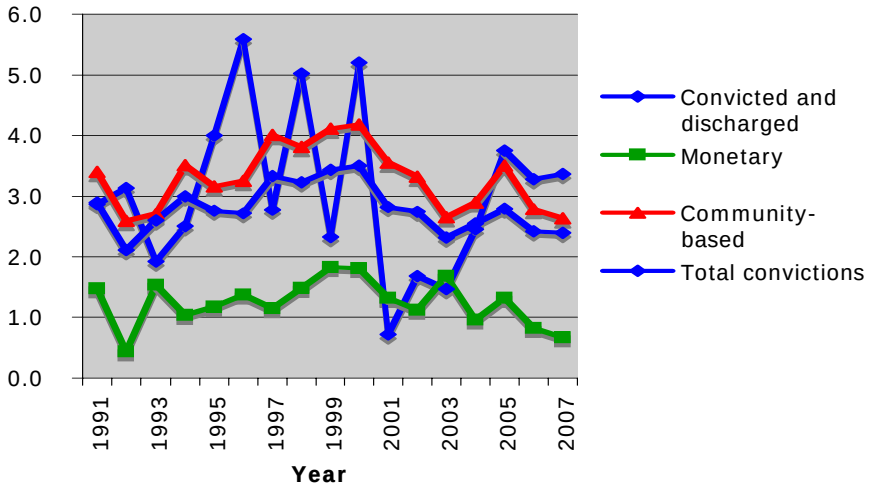


Figure 5A and 5B, Sentencing rates of Pacific Islanders per unit of ethnic population versus Pākehā. (Data from Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

Discrimination of the courts against Māori and Pacific Islanders

There is nothing specifically discriminatory within the Acts themselves and therefore, it seems unlikely that the Domestic Violence Act 1995 and the Domestic Protection Act 1982 could have led to excessive conviction and sentencing rates for both Māori and Pacific Islanders as compared with Pākehā. For Māori a 10-fold excess in conviction rates over that of Pākehā seems excessive. An 18-fold excess in custodial sentences for Māori as compared with Pākehā when expressed per unit of ethnic population seems wildly excessive. Pacific Islanders also show excessive custodial sentences compared with Pākehā although, in their case, the excess is only about 3.5-fold. Do Māori and Pacific Islanders really deserve rates of custodial sentences that are well above those of Pākehā? Or is there some bias within the courts that manifests itself through the application of more aggressive sentencing? An investigation aimed at identifying reasons for these apparent biases against Māori and Pacific

Islanders needs to be set in motion and one approach is to examine the court records in detail to gauge whether or not racial biases exist within the court system.

It should be noted that this paper does not deny that domestic violence is an issue amongst Māori and Pacific Islanders. However, it does question the degree of that issue and the potential role of the court system in propelling those statistics into the realms of the extraordinary. Even though Māori may have a problem with domestic violence, there is a need to recognise that the manner in which majority ethnic groups perceive minorities plays an important part in the process of criminalisation (Fekete, 2001; Kundnani, 2007; Smith, 2008).

The criminalisation of ethnic minorities

The excessively high rates of criminal convictions for domestic violence violations and the discriminatory sentencing that targets Māori, speaks to a process of criminalisation of Māori males within the judiciary in New Zealand. Wikipedia defines criminalisation as "the process by which behaviors and individuals are transformed into crime and criminals" (*Criminalisation*, 2009). The criminalisation of Māori has been studied by Simone Bull who states that:

> The British colonial government also criminalized Maori whenever they 'rebelled'. In the statistics presented here, gross violations of human rights and the criminalization of Maori independence are reflected in four distinct episodes: around the mid-1860s, 1881, 1897 and 1911. The analysis points to conflict and critical criminology as the principal paradigms through which the 'crimes' of the powerful colonial state converted Maori into criminals. (Bull, 2004, p. 496).

Could this process of criminalisation of Māori continue today and could the foundations of that process reside within the judiciary itself?

Māori account for only 14.7% of the New Zealand population but they commit more acts of violence than any other ethnic group (Statistics New Zealand, 2008) and the reasons for this have been variously attributed to his nature (Hook, 2009c), his poverty and his victimhood arising from 150 years of colonization (Bryant & Willis, 2008). However, Māori are not the only indigenous people around the world who are marked by high levels of victimization. The Metis and Inuit as well as who belong to the First nations of Canada, show higher rates of domestic violence than do the mainstream. In their case the figures are 2 to 3 times higher than the Canadian average (Chartrand & Mckay, 2006). This high rate of crime in aboriginal communities has been attributed directly to the history of colonization and its continuing effects on Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

Australian Aborigines are also found to experience violent victimization at a rate much higher than non-indigenous peoples (Bryant & Willis, 2008). According to Bryant and Willis (2008) the rates of victimization occurs at 2 to 3 times the rate of non-indigenous peoples. Thus while some may say that Māori are just an exceptionally violent people, these other examples show that disproportionate sentencing of ethnic minorities is not unique to New Zealand. Indeed, it is even present in England and Wales (Goodman & Ruggiero, 2008).

We may have become inured to the propaganda provided through the media that Māori are a violent people, but this is nothing more than racial stereotyping. The image is an old one perpetuated through the centuries from a time when colonial advancement meant denigration of those who stood between them and the land they desired. Although the land has since been taken, the violent stereotype remains and today is reworked in the newspapers every time a violent act is committed by a Māori. In no way am I suggesting that Māori are totally

innocent of the charges against him, but I do suggest that there is a bias in our social order that is seeded by colonial greed, that even today helps perpetuate the myths and prevents Māori from achieving true racial equality.

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The author acknowledges the assistance of L. Parehaereone Raumati in researching and debating the content of this manuscript. Thanks are also due to Lynne Mackie (info@stats.govt.nz) of Statistics New Zealand for her help in gathering the data.

This research was funded by the Institute for Māori Research and Development, Whangaparaoa. G. Raumati Hook (Ngāti Mutunga. Ngāti Toa, Te Atiawa) is an Adjunct Professor at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Director of the Institute for Māori Research and Development.

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