Using material from the Item above and elsewhere assess some of the reasons why official crime statistics may give a misleading impression of high levels of black offending. (21 marks)

Racism is an issue that is never too far from the surface when a person of ethnic minority background comes into contact with the police. Phillips and Bowling say that there is a consistent pattern of over-representation of people of African-Caribbean background in the prisons of Britain. There is not only an over-representation of black people in prisons but also in official statistics. For example the Ministry of Justice report that although the population of people from any black decent in the UK is 3%, the percentage of prison inmates is 15%. This is a massive over representation and suggests that there may be underlying causes as to why this value is so high. Chinese people are under represented in statistics, as are white people.

The infamous Stephen Lawrence case highlighted issues of institutional racism within the police forces of Britain. This incident led to the Macpherson enquiry, which set out a list of recommendations that the police should adhere to in order to prevent racist judgments being made in future. Phillips and Bowling (2002) (in a study conducted after the enquiry) state that the neighborhoods where ethnic minorities live are majorly over-policed. Therefore, the reason for such a high black inmate percentage could be due to the fact that because black people are stopped and searched more than people of any other ethnic background. This has a knock on effect as more people being stopped increases the probability of an arrest being made, this arrest being taken to court due to a person being convicted.

In 1994, an act was passed which allows police to stop and search a person without having suspicion (presumably due to the increase in rate of terrorist attacks). Phillips and Bowling also believe that this is used to excuse the disproportionate rate at which ethnic minority groups are stopped and searched. Boorah later found that members of ethnic minority background were more likely to be stopped and searched than they were to be arrested. This supports Phillips and Bowling’s ideas that bringing in a policy where stops and searches that did not have to be catalogue was being used in a racist way.

Left-realists, Lea and Young argue that institutional racism within the police cannot be entirely to blame for the disproportionate figures portrayed in Official Statistics. For example, the fact the majority of crime is reported by the public and that the number of crimes in Official Statistics only represent the number of crimes ‘known to the police’ and are not very well divided in terms of the type of crime committed. Lea and Young state that African Caribbeans have higher offending rates than white people for some crimes, for example; street crimes. There is also a large ‘dark figure’ of crime and therefore if all crimes committed were recorded then perhaps statistics would be skewed the other way. They state that the notion in official statistics that black people have the highest offending rights is incorrect. They go on to say that police racism would have to ‘manifest itself very strangely’ to be entirely responsible for the over-representation of black people in statistics.

Lea and Young believe that high levels of unemployment and racial discrimination could result in minority ethnic groups committing more street crime than others. The vast majority of people from ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK are inherently working class: particularly those of black and Asian descent. 50% of black people in Britain receive some form of income support, this is only 20% for white people.