

Poverty and Crime: Why a new war on criminals would help the poor most

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Summary

When crime and poverty are discussed, the typical debate is about whether – and how much – poverty makes someone crime-prone. This overshadows discussions about the law-abiding majority of the poor, and whether they are more likely to be the *victims*. Using extensive survey and crime data, this paper shows that in fact the poor are by far the most likely to be affected by crime. One of the worst aspects of being poor in modern Britain is the far greater likelihood of living near criminals and being their victim – and the fear this produces.

While all law-abiding people would benefit from lower crime, it is those on lower incomes and those who live in deprived areas who would benefit most. Compared to households on incomes above £50,000, those on incomes below £10,000 are:

- Considerably more likely to be attacked by someone they know and far more likely to be attacked by a stranger;
- Twice as likely to suffer violence with injury;
- Twice as likely to be burgled;
- Three times as likely to be robbed and mugged;
- Three times as likely to suffer rape or attempted rape;
- Six times as likely to be a victim of domestic violence.

Fear of crime also plagues the lives of the poor in a way that is unrecognisable to the affluent. The poor are more than twice as likely to fear burglary and rape – and three times as likely to fear attacks, robbery and car crime. This fear is justified, as there are three and a half times as many criminals living in the 20% most deprived areas as in the 20% least deprived areas.

In addition to the fear and reality of much higher crime, the poor also suffer:

- Significant barriers to social mobility: those who need a car or bicycle to get to work are more likely to see their means of transport stolen and damaged. The greatest disparity between poor and rich in what crime they fear is in the fear of the poor of their car being stolen. This is four times as high among the poor as it is among the most affluent;
- Greater insurance premiums: costs that they are least equipped to afford;
- The cost of replacing goods: despite their low incomes;
- Higher shop prices: an inevitable result of the cost of lost stock, the higher costs of hiring people to work in high crime areas, the additional security costs, the higher insurance premiums paid by shops and the costs of using shop floor space differently;
- Social breakdown as people withdraw from their communities and fear to go outside.

Tougher sentencing and more police are popular at all income levels. But they are particularly popular with the poor and in deprived areas. They are the most likely of any income group to support 'harsher sentences for crimes involving violence and sexual assault' and 'increasing the amount of police on the streets'. Policymakers should recognise that as well as being a major problem in its own right, crime is the leading social justice issue facing the country. Crime and its effects hurt the poor most.

At the policing end, more police patrolling the streets would deter and prevent crime. At the sentencing end, even small increases in the number of prison places could have a major impact. The average criminal commits 140 to 176 crimes a year when they are out of prison. Even marginal increases in the number of prison places would mean tens of thousands fewer poor people being victims of crime. Policymakers should bow to the evidence and commit to tougher anti-crime policies that help all honest people – and help the poor most.

Introduction

Debates on the possible links between crime and poverty go back at least as far as Aristotle – and his claim that 'poverty is the parent of crime'.¹ This statement aptly summarises the great bulk of commentary on crime and poverty. While almost everyone pays lip service to the idea that the victim's interests should be paramount, the link between poverty and crime is usually discussed in terms of criminals rather than their victims.

Much of this academic debate is nuanced and data driven. One meta-analysis of the links between poverty and violent crime looked at 34 separate studies and found substantial variation in estimates of how big the relationship between poverty and committing crimes is – and in which crimes poverty contributes to.²

Less nuanced is some of the media debate that this analysis feeds into. While there is evidence that criminals are likely to be poor, it is very important to distinguish this from the view that the poor are likely to be criminals. The latter view is unsupported by the data and is insulting to those on low incomes as well as a basic error in logic. Criminals are not representative of poor people. Sensational media headlines such as 'Today's Britain: where the poor are forced to steal ... a system where the hungry go to jail'³, 'The law exists to clamp down on the misdemeanours of the poor'⁴ and 'Poverty "pushing young into crime"'⁵ do not reflect the evidence. Most importantly for policymakers, discussions about a minority of the poor committing crimes risks overshadowing discussions about the law-abiding majority of the poor, and whether they suffer crime disproportionately.

This paper looks at crime and poverty through that lens of victimisation. Even when a link can be drawn between poverty and committing crimes, is there also a link between poverty and falling victim to crime? If so, how much more likely are the poor, and those living in the poorest areas, to suffer crime? How would a softer approach to the minority of poor people who commit lots of crimes affect their law-abiding neighbours? Would a tougher approach to crime disproportionately help those with least?

Poverty and crime

Anyone can be a victim of crime – but not everyone is. A person's chances of falling victim to crime varies significantly depending on their age, where in the country they live, and many other variables such as how often they visit pubs, as shown in the Crime Survey of England and Wales.⁶

But some of the most compelling differences come down to income. For a range of offences, Table 1 gives the number of crimes per head suffered by those with incomes below £10,000 for every 100 crimes per head suffered by those on incomes above £50,000. It also compares the probability of being a victim. (These two measures – the incidence and the prevalence – differ because the same victim can suffer a crime more than once each year.)

Table 1

	No. crimes per head suffered by those with household incomes below £10,000 for every 100 crimes per head suffered by those on household incomes above £50,000 ⁷	No. victims per head with household incomes below £10,000 for every 100 victims per head on household incomes above £50,000 ⁸
Theft from a dwelling and meter	399	266
Robbery	298	285
Mugging	285	262
Rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) ⁹		275
Attempted burglary in dwelling	271	195
Snatch theft	244	244
Domestic violence	225	563
Common assault with injury	220	232
Violence with injury	215	216
Attempted snatch and stealth theft	209	163
Wounding	205	187
Burglary in dwelling	205	163
Theft from the person	201	176
Stealth theft	183	179
Stranger violence	172	141
Common assault	167	157
Other household theft	159	142
Theft from outside dwelling	143	136
Arson and other criminal damage	130	125
Acquaintance violence	123	125
All vehicle crime	49	38
All personal theft	134	132
All violence	173	164
All personal crime	162	152

Those on the lowest incomes experience 62% more personal crime – and 73% more violent crime. Notably, the most damaging crimes are especially concentrated on the poor:

- Those with household incomes below £10,000 per annum suffer violence with injury at more than double the rate of those with household incomes above £50,000.
- They suffer robbery and muggings at three times the rate.
- They are more likely to be attacked by someone they know and far more likely to be attacked by a stranger.
- Rape and attempted rape are almost three times as common.

- Incidents of domestic violence are more than twice as common – and the chance of being a victim of domestic violence is almost six times as high.
- Burglary and attempted burglaries were both more than twice as common.

The only significant exception to this pattern was in vehicle crime. A car being beyond the means of many households with incomes below £10,000, the poor are substantially less likely to suffer from this offence.

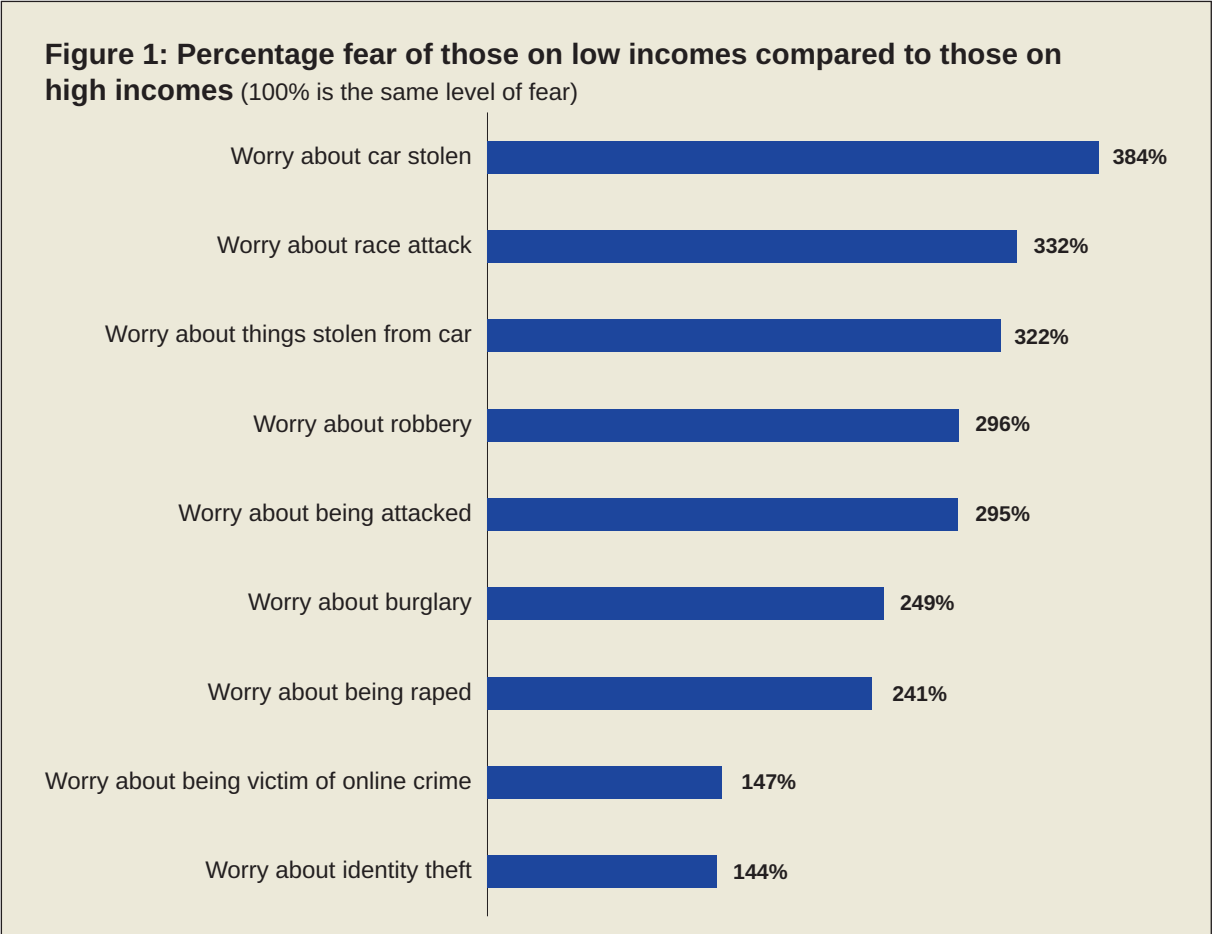
A very similar pattern can be seen when looking at areas of greatest economic deprivation, rather than at the victim's income.

Table 2	No. crimes per head in the 20% most deprived areas for every 100 crimes per head suffered by those in the 20% least deprived areas¹⁰	No. victims per head in the 20% most deprived areas for every 100 victims per head in the 20% least deprived areas¹¹
Domestic violence	297	370
Attempted burglary in dwelling	270	238
Arson and other criminal damage	263	302
Other household theft	250	238
Domestic burglary with entry and no loss	239	245
Burglary in dwelling	236	206
Bicycle theft	235	210
Wounding	234	347
Robbery	215	156
Violence with injury	205	269
Mugging	184	135
Domestic burglary with entry and loss	130	118
Theft from a motor vehicle	118	117
Theft of a motor vehicle	116	108
Other personal theft	112	102
Snatch theft	92	92
All household crime	172	154
All vehicle crime	128	118
All personal theft	119	107
All vehicle-related theft	106	106
All household theft	164	151
All violence	162	195
All personal crime	146	146

Domestic violence, arson and other criminal damage, household theft, burglary and attempted burglary, bicycle theft, wounding, robbery and violence with injury are all between twice and three times as common per head in deprived areas. Even falling victim to motor vehicle crime or bicycle theft is more common in deprived areas, despite the cost of ownership making them rarer in the first place.

Poverty and fear of crime

It is not only crime itself that disproportionately plagues the lives of the poor. The fear of crime is also far greater, with people on low incomes showing a clear awareness of their predicament.



As Figure 1 shows, those on household incomes below £10,000 are between two and a half and three times as likely to live in fear of burglary, rape, robbery and attacks compared to households with incomes above £50,000.¹² Fears of a racial attack and vehicle crime are greater still.¹³

High levels of concern are also much greater. Those on low incomes are about three times as likely to report a 'high level of worry' about burglary, about car crime and about violent crime.¹⁴ They are also around three times as likely to perceive high levels of anti-social behaviour in their local area.¹⁵

Implications

The fear and the reality of crime infect the lives of the poor in a way that the affluent can only imagine. As if the horror of being burgled, attacked or raped – or this happening to a loved one – were not enough, the injustice goes far beyond this.

A detailed comparison of the data above shows that the more serious the crime, the greater the disparity between rich and poor. Per head, personal crime is 46% more prevalent in deprived areas – but violent crime is 95% more prevalent. In turn, this violent crime in deprived areas is also more serious. Per head, violence without injury is 47% more prevalent in deprived areas – while violence with injury is almost three times as prevalent. The poor suffer rape at three times the rate of the affluent.

The figures show that the poor are twice as likely to be burgled, but exploring this data further is also revealing. In a grim irony, the poor are even more likely – two and a half times as likely – to suffer burglary without loss. In other words, people so poor they have nothing criminals deem worth taking are the most likely to suffer the trauma of a burglary. This is likely to instil an ongoing fear of intruders, and of purchasing property that might later be stolen. An important example of this is fear of owning a car or a bicycle – other than walking, the only realistic means of transport in many parts of the country.

As shown above, fear of crime is consistently higher among those on low incomes. But the greatest disparity between poor and rich – almost four times as high – is in the fear of the poor of their car being stolen. Even though vehicle ownership is far less common in deprived areas, people living in the most deprived areas who need a car or bicycle to get to work – to get ahead in life, escape poverty and provide for their loved ones – are nonetheless more likely to fall victim to vehicle crime. All this suggests that among the ways crime hurts the poor most is as a barrier to social mobility.

The poor are least able to afford to insure goods – and pay insurance premiums. Even so, insurance premiums are higher in high crime areas to reflect the greater risk. If the poor do not insure goods that are later stolen, they are least able to afford replacements.

High crime also forces up prices in deprived areas. The economist Thomas Sowell explains that this is an inevitable result of the cost of lost stock, the higher costs of hiring people to work in high crime areas, the additional security costs, the higher insurance premiums paid by shops and the costs of using shop floor space differently – keeping items away from the entrance, where criminals can steal them quickly and run:

The direct costs of a higher rate of vandalism, shoplifting and hold-ups are obvious. The honest customers pay these costs in higher prices...

They pay indirectly as well. Some stores close up and move out when the strain of coping with violence, vandalism and harassment becomes too much. Once the store is gone... these costs may now be even greater, in terms of having to travel longer distances to find a store, a pharmacy, or a place to eat. For those too poor to afford an automobile, this 'price' may be very high, especially if they are elderly, ill, or a woman alone.

The price indexes that statisticians put together do not include the costs of an elderly or sick person's having to wait on the corner in the winter for a bus to go to the nearest market, or the cost of a mother's having to walk for blocks at night through a high-crime neighbourhood, looking for a drug store for medicine for a sick child.¹⁶

These facts combine to ensure very different experiences of everyday life that go well beyond material disparities. The Labour MP David Lammy argues:

The law abiding in high crime areas feel they need to minimise risk by withdrawing from their community, fearing to go outside. This has a major impact on community cohesion, as an area becomes more and more a place for atomised individuals.

Raising a family in high crime areas can be a constant battle. How easily can a parent instil the value of work and respect in children who see violence and robbery as normal, and who may come to see crime as a viable way to become wealthy? Gangs are also most common in the poorest, high crime areas of the country. Among their other appeals is that in a sense they are competing directly with the Police in offering their members protection against victimisation by other criminals.¹⁷

What policymakers can do

The first response from policymakers must be to recognise crime as a social justice issue – as the leading social justice issue. As material prosperity for those at the bottom has grown dramatically in recent generations, the degree to which the poor live in fear of crime has become probably the greatest injustice they face.

Politicians and policymakers have legitimate disagreements about how significant income inequality is. But all should be able to agree that no one deserves to suffer crime. All social justice campaigns should recognise the reality that crime overwhelmingly hurts the poorest most. One of the worst aspects of being poor in modern Britain is the far greater likelihood of living near criminals and being their victim. With three and a half times as many criminals living in the 20% most deprived areas as in the 20% least deprived areas,¹⁸ it is no wonder the poor fear crime and suffer crime so much more.

The poor are clear about what support they want from authority in dealing with crime. They are the most likely of any income group to support tough measures such as ‘harsher sentences for crimes involving violence and sexual assault’ and ‘increasing the amount of police on the streets’.¹⁹ As the latter statement suggests, it is a dangerous misconception that people in deprived areas are anti-police (although the minority who are criminals may well be). The data shows a positive view of the police across the income spectrum. There were very small differences between the lowest and highest income groups in their levels of agreement to statements such as ‘Police can be relied on when needed’ and ‘Police understand local concerns’.

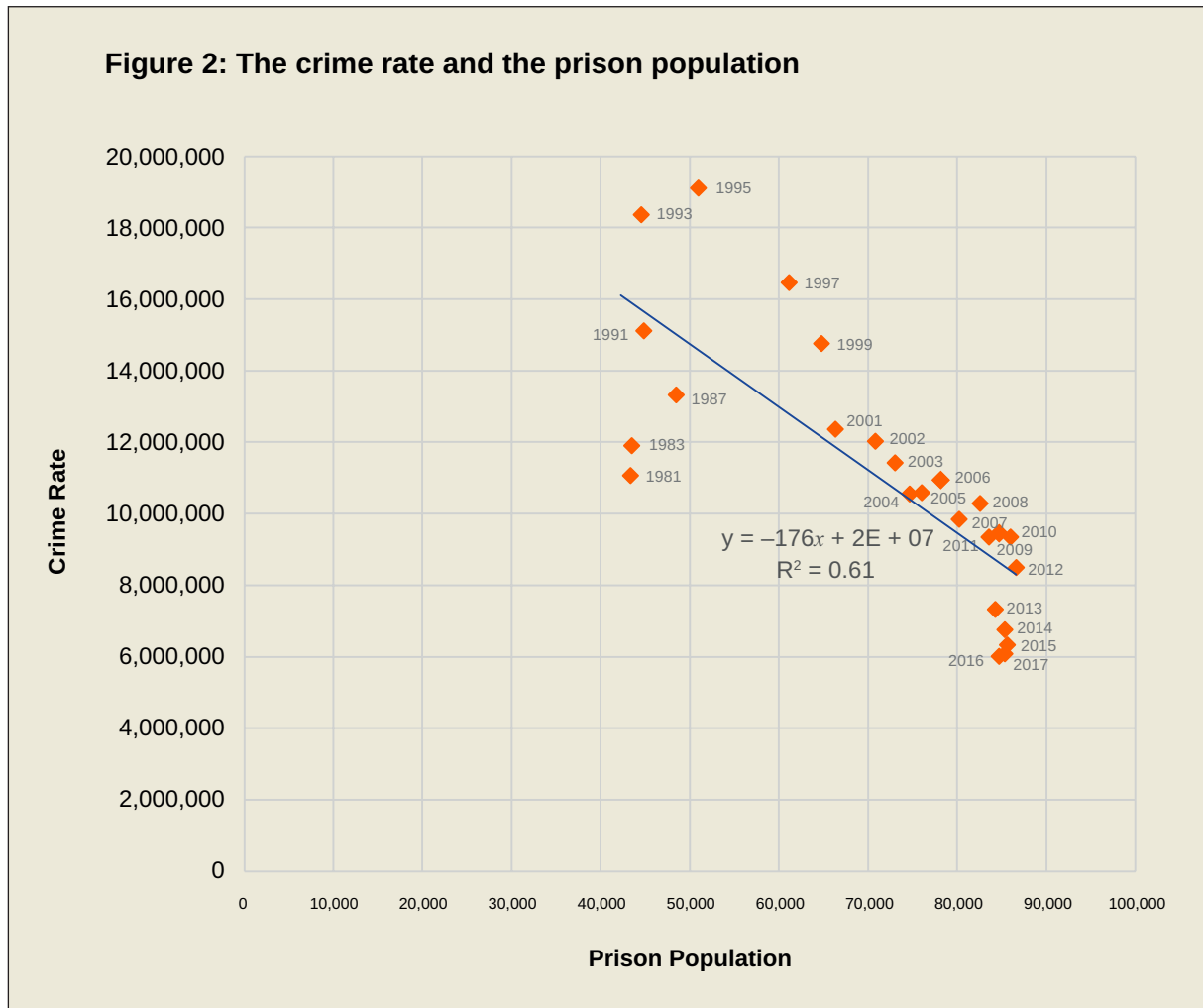
Table 3
Percentage saying ‘Strongly agree’ or ‘tend to agree’²⁰

	Total household income less than £10,000	Total household income £50,000 or more
Police can be relied on when needed	62%	61%
Police would treat you with respect	86%	89%
Police would treat you fairly	68%	67%
Police understand local concerns	71%	71%
Police deal with local concerns	63%	59%
Police in this area can be trusted	77%	83%
Overall confidence in local police	76%	82%

Robust policing protects the honest poor – and the poor want more police. Tougher sentencing is popular across the income spectrum²¹ – but it would help the poor most of all.

It is easy to underestimate the effect of locking up the average criminal even for as little as a year, but each prison sentence means no one outside that prison can be victimised by them for the duration of the time they serve. The numbers of crimes prevented appear to be very large indeed. In 2000, the Home Office concluded that the average offender committed 140 crimes every year.²² The average drug offender was estimated to commit 257 crimes a year.²³

The graph below shows that, since 1980, every extra criminal in prison was associated with an average of 176 fewer crimes a year. The result was statistically significant and the correlation was 0.78, implying that more than 60% of the variation in crime rates was attributable to how many criminals were in prison, rather than free to commit crimes.²⁴



Even small increases in the number of prison places would mean tens of thousands fewer poor people being victims of crime. As well as protecting the poor from offending while the offender is in prison, the proper use of prison guards against reoffending too.

While reoffending by criminals is too high for all punishments, prison is better than the alternatives on this measure too. The re-offending rate for criminals serving community sentences is higher than for all but the shortest prison sentences – even though those criminals sent to prison are much more likely to be hardened criminals.

The main difference between prisons and non-custodial sentences is for those who serve two years or more in prison. These criminals have a lower reoffending rate than non-custodial alternatives, despite being much more serious offenders. The longer the prison sentence, the lower the reoffending rate.²⁵ One policeman explained the difference:

If you have someone in custody who is facing a proper sentence, they change. Suddenly, they want to talk to you and grass their mates up, suddenly they want a lawyer, suddenly they need consultations for hours, suddenly they are in tears and want to see their family, suddenly they are asking their missus to bring in their favourite pictures of the kids. They are calling you Sir and smoking 20 fags an hour. When you have the same men in for a summary-only offence (only triable before the magistrates, with no custodial sentences beyond six months and terms that long an extreme rarity), they're sneering and swaggering and hoping the police officers and their families all die of cancer.²⁶

Protecting the poor from crime is therefore not only about more serious and prolific criminals going to prison – it is about them serving longer sentences too. Despite these facts, the evidence is that prison is used far too sparingly – as an exclusive club for the most serious and prolific offenders, and only some of them.²⁷ As a recent Civitas paper revealed, prolific criminals are now far more likely to avoid prison than a decade ago. In 2016, there were 20,900 non-custodial sentences for criminals with at least 36 previous convictions or cautions – double the 10,500 figure in 2006.²⁸

Setting far too high a bar before imposing custodial sentences disadvantages the law abiding in general. But it disadvantages the poor most because the poor are most likely to be their victims. Policymakers should bow to the evidence and commit to tougher anti-crime policies that help all honest people – and help the poor most.

Notes

- ¹ 'To have and have not', *The Economist*, 21 August 2014, at <https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2014/08/21/to-have-and-have-not>
- ² 'Poverty, Income Inequality, and Violent Crime: A Meta-Analysis of Recent Aggregate Data Studies', Ching-Chi Hsieh, M. D. Pugh, *Criminal Justice Review*, 1 September 1993, at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/073401689301800203>
- ³ 'Today's Britain: where the poor are forced to steal or beg from food banks', Aditya Chakraborty, *The Guardian*, 27 October 2014, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/27/todays-britain-poor-forced-steal-food-banks>
- ⁴ 'Prison doesn't work – as the Glen Parva shambles shows' Owen Jones, *The Guardian*, 6 August 2016, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/06/prison-does-not-work-glen-parva-shambles>
- ⁵ 'Poverty "pushing young into crime"', *The Independent*, 16 February 1993, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/poverty-pushing-young-into-crime-1473256.html>
- ⁶ References to Crime Survey of England and Wales data are to the most recent available survey, 'Crime in England and Wales: year ending December 2017', Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingdecember2017>
- ⁷ Household Crime Incidence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/householdcrimeincidenccecsewopendatatable> and Personal Crime Incidence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/personalcrimeincidenccecsewopendatatable>
- ⁸ Household Crime Prevalence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/householdcrimeprevalenccecsewopendatatable> and Personal Crime Prevalence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/personalcrimeprevalenccecsewopendatatable>
- ⁹ 'Table 11: Prevalence of sexual assault in the last year among adults aged 16 to 59, by household and area characteristics1 and sex, year ending March 2017 CSEW', Sexual offences: appendix tables, Office for National Statistics, 8 February 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/sexualoffencesappendixtables/yearendingmarch2017/sexualoffencesappendixtablesmarch2017.xls>
- ¹⁰ Household Crime Incidence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/householdcrimeincidenccecsewopendatatable> and Personal Crime Incidence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/personalcrimeincidenccecsewopendatatable>
- ¹¹ Household Crime Prevalence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/householdcrimeprevalenccecsewopendatatable> and Personal Crime Prevalence (CSEW Open Data Table), Office for National Statistics, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/personalcrimeprevalenccecsewopendatatable>
- ¹² Public perceptions of crime in England and Wales – Appendix tables, Office for National Statistics, 7 September 2017, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/publicperceptionsofcrimeinenglandandwalesappendixtables>
- ¹³ *Ibid*
- ¹⁴ 'Table S34: Worry about crime by household and area characteristics, year ending March 2017 CSEW', Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables, Office for National Statistics, 20 July 2017, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesannualsupplementarytables>
- ¹⁵ Table S36: High levels of perceived anti-social behaviour in local area by household and area characteristics, year ending March 2017 CSEW, Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables, Office for National Statistics, 20 July 2017, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesannualsupplementarytables>
- ¹⁶ *Compassion Versus Guilt and Other Essays (1987)*, Thomas Sowell, William Morrow and Company, pp.18-21
- ¹⁷ 'Low Crime For All', David Lammy, Policy Exchange, September 2015, at <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/low-crime-for-all-how-to-reduce-crime-fo-londons-communities.pdf>, pp.8-9

- ¹⁸ Figure 3: Offenders per 100 working age population by low income poverty, LA districts in England and Wales, 2006–13 average, 'Counting the cost of UK poverty', Glen Bramley, Donald Hirsh, Mandy Littlewood and David Watkins, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, August 2016, p.45
- ¹⁹ 'Overlooked But Decisive', James Frayne, Policy Exchange, 2015, at <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/overlooked-but-decisive.pdf>, p.50
- ²⁰ 'Table S6: Perceptions of the local police by household and area characteristics, year ending March 2017 CSEW', Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables, Office for National Statistics, 20 July 2017, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesannualsupplementarytables>
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- ²² 'Prison Works', Glyn Gaskarth, Policy Exchange, 24 February 2015, at <https://policyexchange.org.uk/prison-works/>
- ²³ Ibid
- ²⁴ See also 'Howard was right that prison works – and we should honour his success', Peter Cuthbertson, ConservativeHome, 15 April 2017, at <https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2017/04/peter-cuthbertson-howard-was-right-that-prison-works-and-we-should-honour-his-success.html>
- ²⁵ Ibid, graph 3
- ²⁶ 'The failure of revolving door community sentencing', Peter Cuthbertson, Centre for Crime Prevention, 21 February 2013, p.6 at <http://www.centreforcrimeprevention.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-failure-of-revolving-door-community-sentencing.pdf>
- ²⁷ See in particular, 'Who goes to prison? An overview of the prison population of England and Wales', Peter Cuthbertson, Civitas, December 2017, at <http://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/whogoesstoprison.pdf>
- ²⁸ 'The growing number of prolific criminals and the increased concentration of crime: A case for more prison places', Peter Cuthbertson, Civitas, February 2018, p.6 at <http://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/prolificcriminals.pdf>

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