

Fighting Crime: Are Public Policies Working?

Online Briefing

Why has crime fallen since the mid-1990s? Has it fallen because of the Government's policies? What are the alternative policies? How much crime do we experience compared with other countries? Is it going up or down at present?

Summary

- England and Wales have the fourth highest rate of recorded crime out of 39 European countries – twice the European average – and the second highest rate of victimisation according to the 17-country International Crime Victim Survey.
- Much press coverage focuses on whether crime has gone up or down during the last year, but changes in counting rules for police-recorded crime in 1998/99 and 2002/03 have made comparison difficult.
- There is, however, a continuous series for recorded crime before 1998/99. Between 1950 and 1992 recorded crime increased by 12 times from 461,000 to 5,592,000. By 1998/99 it had fallen back to 4,482,000, still nearly ten times the rate in 1950. Even if we assume the whole of the increase between 1998/99 and 2003/04 was due to changes in the counting rules, the 2003/04 estimate is still around ten times the 1950 figure.
- It is distraction for public debate to focus on whether crime is 12 times the rate in 1950 or ten times that rate, particularly when we have the fourth highest rate of recorded crime out of 39 European countries and the second highest rate of victimisation according to the ICVS.
- The British Crime Survey first produced figures for 1981, when there were 11.1m crimes. The number increased by 1995 to over 19m and has fallen back to 11.7m by 2003/04.
- Crime fell according to police records after 1992 and, according to the BCS, after 1995. The Conservatives were in office until May 1997 and Labour subsequently and both claim credit for falling crime while in power. One cause of the fall has been the increased use of prison since 1993, when the prison population was 45,600. By 1997 the Conservatives had increased it to 62,000. The Blair Government has added another 13,000, taking the total to about 75,000. The average prisoner is thought to have committed 140 crimes in the year before capture. If so, the incarceration of 13,000 offenders saved over 1.8m crimes.
- The alternatives to prison introduced by both the Major and Blair Governments have not reduced offending.

- Offending behaviour programmes (such as thinking skills and anger management courses), costing at least £2,000 each, have been found not to reduce crime. About 80% of participants had been reconvicted within two years.
- Drug Treatment and Testing Orders in the community did not reduce offending. About 70% of offenders did not even complete their order and 80% were reconvicted of a crime within two years.
- The Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme was found to be less effective than ordinary probation at reducing offending. The reoffending rate after 12 months for those on community ISSP was 84%, compared with 72% for the control group. Over half of offenders (53%) did not even complete the six-month programme.
- The Government has placed great emphasis on its Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets. According to the Treasury, they are now supported by 'rigorous performance information'. However, in two cases, performance has got worse: fewer offenders are being brought to justice and the number of robberies has gone up.
- Two of the most effective measures for reducing offending – providing prisoners with literacy, numeracy and vocational qualifications and getting them off drugs – have not been fully implemented.

How much crime?

How much crime do we have compared with other countries and with our own history? How reliable are the published figures? There are two sets of crime figures, those derived from police records and those based on the British Crime Survey (BCS), a survey of private households that has provided results since 1981.

The BCS drew attention to flaws in the police figures. It was discovered that many people did not report crimes to the police (often because they thought the police would do nothing, although sometimes because they thought the offence too trivial). Moreover, when members of the public did report crimes, the police did not always record them. The Home Office has produced estimates of the extent of under-reporting and under-recording since 1981. In 1981, 36% of BCS crimes were reported to the police. The proportion had increased to 49% in 1991 and has fallen back to 44-45% since 1997. In 1981, 62% of crimes reported to the police were recorded, falling back to 50% by 1995 and then increasing to 74% by 2003.

However, the BCS has its own faults. First, it has the weaknesses of all surveys, not least a varying response rate. Second, it only covers victims of crimes in private

households, thus missing out a large number of crimes recorded by the police. Each year estimates are made of the extent of the overlap by contrasting the 'comparable subset' of crimes. In 2003/04 only 48% of crimes recorded by the police were covered by the BCS.

Is crime going up or down?

Answering this question has been complicated by the changes in the method of collecting police figures in 1998/99 and 2002/03. In 1998/99, apart from moving from calendar years to financial years, forces also began to base crimes more on victim reports. Above all entirely new categories were included in police figures, notably common assault, which alone added 151,000 additional crimes. Overall the total amount of crime was 14% higher because of the change.¹ In 2002/03 the NCRS was introduced in a further attempt to make police records more compatible with the BCS. The police were expected to record all crimes reported to them by the public and to record each crime victim. This could increase the total amount of crime because a single incident, for example, of vandalising three cars on a single occasion would have been recorded as one crime under the old rules, but was counted as three crimes under the new rules (because three car owners were victims). In 2002/03 the Home Office estimated that the introduction of the NCRS increased the total amount of crime by 10%.²

Comparisons of trends before 1998/99 and after, therefore, require caution, especially when comparing violent crime. Similarly, comparisons of the figures before and after 2002/03 also require caution. However, even if we take the view that every recorded crime total since 1998/99 should be reduced by 14%, and every total since 2002/03 by a further 10%, the figure in 2003/04 works out at 4.594 million and is higher than the 1998/99 total under the old counting rules.

The best we can say is that total recorded crime has been broadly stable since 1998/99, or increased slightly. Violent crime, however, cannot really be explained in the same way. There was an 82.5% increase in 1998/99 and the narrower category of 'violence against the person' increased by 120% as a result of the changes, which added common assault and assault on a constable to the list of notifiable offences.³ Even so, the Home Office acknowledges that violent crime has increased, after allowing for these changes.

To sum up: crime is down from its British Crime Survey peak in 1995, but it's only back to where it was in the early 1980s, by which time (according to police records) it was ten times the rate in the 1950s. To understand the context we need to compare ourselves with other European countries.

Historical and international comparisons

As Figure 1 shows, crime is historically high. Moreover, compared with other countries, crime in England and Wales is also high. Among the most reliable surveys is the International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) of 2000, which covers 17 countries. The latest ICVS found that England and Wales in 1999 had the second highest risk of crime. Australia was bottom of the league with 30 per cent of people reporting that they had been a victim of crime, and England and Wales came next with 26 per cent. In the USA the figure was only 21 per cent. In Europe, the Netherlands and Sweden were not much better than England and Wales with figures of 25 per cent, but in France only 21 per cent reported that they had suffered from crime. Based on crimes reported to the British Crime Survey in 2000, if the French figure had applied to England and Wales, there would have been nearly three million fewer crimes.

Moreover, police records of crime throughout Europe reveal that England and Wales had the fourth highest crime rate out of the 39 countries in the 2003 *European Sourcebook of Crime*, compiled by an international team (including the Home Office) under the auspices of the Council of Europe. At 9,817 crimes per 100,000 population, it was more than double the average of 4,333.

Is it alarmist to draw attention to these international comparisons? Or is it complacent to ignore them?

Why has crime fallen since the 1990s?

According to the BCS, crime is back to where it was in the early 1980s. Police records suggest that crime peaked in 1992 and that, after deducting increases due to changes in the counting rules, it is back to where it was in about 1990. However, the peak in the 1990s was the result of a surge in criminal activity because of some exceptionally counter-productive measures taken in the 1980s and early 1990s. The 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act weakened the police, and the introduction of the Crown Prosecution Service in 1986 increased the tendency for cases to be dropped, thus encouraging criminals to believe they could get away with it. The police increased the use of cautions and unrecorded warnings. The deterrent effect of sentencing was reduced for some of the most common crimes, notably car theft in 1988. The 1991 Criminal Justice Act prevented judges from taking previous convictions into account in most cases. Many academics undermined public confidence by continually claiming that crime was not really rising, as the figures suggested, rather there was a moral panic. The handling of young offenders was weakened by the assumption that, if they were labelled bad they would become criminals, and so

crime must be treated as a welfare problem not a police matter. The prison population was deliberately reduced, thus diminishing both the incapacitation and deterrent effects of jail. The surge in crime in the late 1980s and early 1990s is captured by both the police records and the BCS as Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix 1 show.

One cause of the fall has been the increased use of prison since 1993, when the prison population was 45,600. By 1997 the Conservatives had increased it to 62,000. The Blair Government has added another 13,000, taking the total to about 75,000. A Home Office survey found that the average prisoner admitted committing 140 crimes in the year before capture. If so, the incarceration of 13,000 offenders would have saved over 1.8m crimes. In reality, those incarcerated are likely to commit an above average number of offences and so this figure will be an under-estimate.

Other factors have also been at work. The biggest falls have been in burglary and car theft, in part because improved security devices have made it harder to steal cars and to break into houses. Moreover, the economics of burglary have altered. In the 1990s a burglar typically stole the TV, the video and hi-fi equipment, but the second-hand value of these items has fallen significantly. Some of the reduction in break-ins will be the result of this change.

The effectiveness of public policies

Increased use of prison has helped to reduce crime but the Government has been enthusiastic about alternatives to prison, which it claims reduce offending. How effective have three of its leading programmes been?

Offending behaviour programmes (such as thinking skills and anger management courses), costing at least £2,000 each, have been found not to reduce crime. Recent Home Office studies found that reconviction rates did not fall.⁴ In 2002/03 over 12,000 courses were completed at a cost of over £25m.

The Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP) has cost at least £45m since 2001. A press release headed, 'New report shows positive start for bold and imaginative scheme to reform the worst young offenders' admitted that 85% of participants were reconvicted within 12 months of the start of the programme. Over half of offenders (53%) did not even complete the six-month programme. In other words, ISSP was more costly than other community sentences and was less effective. Similar schemes had been tried out in America and rigorously evaluated. They did not reduce offending, but the British Government disregarded this evidence.

Drug treatment in the community looked promising at one stage and millions have also been put into Drug Treatment and Testing Orders. However, they too have not worked. About 70% of offenders did not even complete their order and 80% were reconvicted of a crime within two years.⁵

PSA Targets

The Government has placed great emphasis on its Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets. According to the Spending Review 2004, they are now supported by 'rigorous performance information'. However, in two cases, performance has got worse: fewer offenders are being brought to justice and the number of robberies has gone up.

The baseline for robbery is police-recorded offences in 1999/2000: 68,782 crimes in the ten street crime initiative areas. The target is a reduction in those areas of 14% to 59,153 crimes. The *Autumn Performance Report 2004* shows that there were 76,776 robberies, an *increase* of 12% and still 30% adrift of the target. In addition, there is evidence of a displacement effect from the ten street crime areas. Robberies increased 12% in those areas, but rose 20% in the whole country.⁶

The original intention of the Home Office was to narrow the 'justice gap' by increasing the number of offenders brought to justice to 1.2 million by 2005-06. The target was amended in July 2004 and the deadline extended to 1.25 million offenders by 2007/08. The most recent *Autumn Performance Report* (December 2004) shows that 1.084m offenders were brought to justice by June 2004, still 20,000 below the starting point.

An Alternative Crime-Reduction Strategy

Is there an alternative to the Government's policies? Based on the recommendations of *Crime and Civil Society*, the result of an 18-month study, a new strategy should be conducted on four main fronts:

- social investment (both public and private) in institutions that encourage a law-abiding lifestyle, especially the family;
- reducing the net benefits of crime by increasing the risk of detection and punishment;
- personalised programmes to reduce reoffending by convicted criminals;
- reducing the net advantages of crime through 'situational' change (including CCTV).

Social Investment

We need to increase social investment in early socialisation and combating disorder in schools. Most people do not commit crimes because they have been brought up to share the community's standards. No crime policy will be able to alter beliefs and attitudes if the institutions for encouraging social cohesion—especially the family, schools and churches—are in a weakened state. Home Office studies have found a link between family breakdown and crime, but the Government has done nothing to strengthen the family based on marriage.

Reduce the Net Advantages of Crime

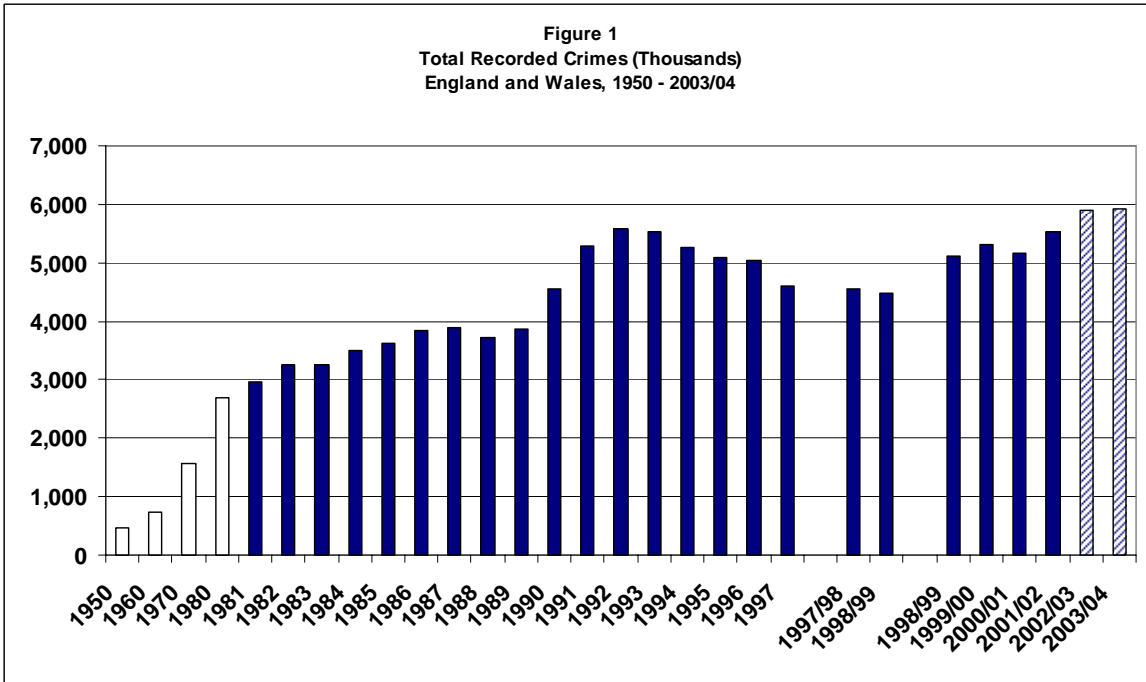
- Increase police numbers and switch police effort to primary prevention (broken windows policing as discussed in *Cultures and Crimes*). In England and Wales in 2000 we had 237 police officers for every 100,000 population. The French had 396 police officers for every 100,000 population, 67% more. But they had a much lower crime rate, 6,405 crimes for every 100,000 population, 35% lower than ours.
- Increase prison capacity. On the Government's own admission, there are about 100,000 offenders who commit half of all crime. It thinks that only 15-20,000 are in jail at any one time. Instead of a crash programme to lock up the other 80,000, its recent national action plan announced a puny effort to focus on only 5,000 ultra-serious offenders. The Home Office's own projections suggest that over 87,000 prison places will be needed by 2011, but provision is not being made. Instead, the Government is letting prisoners out early under Home Detention Curfew and it has a policy of not allowing the prison population to exceed 80,000, despite strong criticism by the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (January 2005).
- Do not put any more public funds into intensive supervision programmes as an alternative to prison.
- Reform parole so that the release date depends on demonstrated good behaviour. At present release at the half-way stage is automatic for prisoners serving under four years, and can be even earlier under Home Detention Curfew. The normal rule should be that the whole sentence is served unless offenders earn up to one-third off for good behaviour, subject to their agreement to be supervised in the community for the remainder of the original sentence, plus at least six months afterwards.

Crime Reduction Through Rehabilitation

- Scrap Offending Behaviour Programmes based on cognitive-behavioural therapy and transfer the money to basic and vocational education. There is good evidence that vocational and work-related skills are beneficial and a significant increase in investment would be justified.
- Extend the use of prison-based therapeutic communities for drug users combined with intensive aftercare.
- Improve prison régimes by assessing prisoners immediately on arrival and treat their stay in jail as a preparation for release. Get them off alcohol and drugs (a problem affecting the majority) and impose mandatory drug testing for all prisoners on admission to jail. One Home Office Study found that 75% of prisoners interviewed had taken drugs whilst in prison, most commonly heroin (53%) and cannabis (55%).⁷ Random mandatory drug tests of prisoners are carried out daily across the prison estate, but the Prison Service annual report concluded in 2002/03 that testing had not led to a significant overall reduction in drug use.⁸ During the course of visits by the Home Affairs Committee in 2004, prisoners complained about the widespread availability of drugs and the consequent impact on morale for those trying to get off drugs.⁹
- Provide educational and vocational skills for all prisoners. There is already a large educational programme but it only touches the surface. The fundamental aim of custody for under-18s is to ensure that they keep up their education, with half the time in custody and half in the community. The National Audit Office found in January 2004 that only 6% of Youth Offending Teams were providing young offenders with the opportunity to continue the education they had started while in custody.
- Increase the supervision of prisoners on release from jail.
- We should introduce a graduated approach to juvenile offending. A 'welfare' approach should be attempted initially. However, if offences continue to be committed, the level of intervention by the authorities should escalate. The more recalcitrant the offender, the more determined the response should be. Our system fails to react with sufficient resilience when dealing with persistent offenders. After providing every opportunity to change, an effective system must be willing to punish individuals who continue to commit crimes. We suggest that once offenders have been convicted three times for an indictable offence, there is such overwhelming evidence that they are likely to spend the next several years committing offences that they should be sent to secure institutions

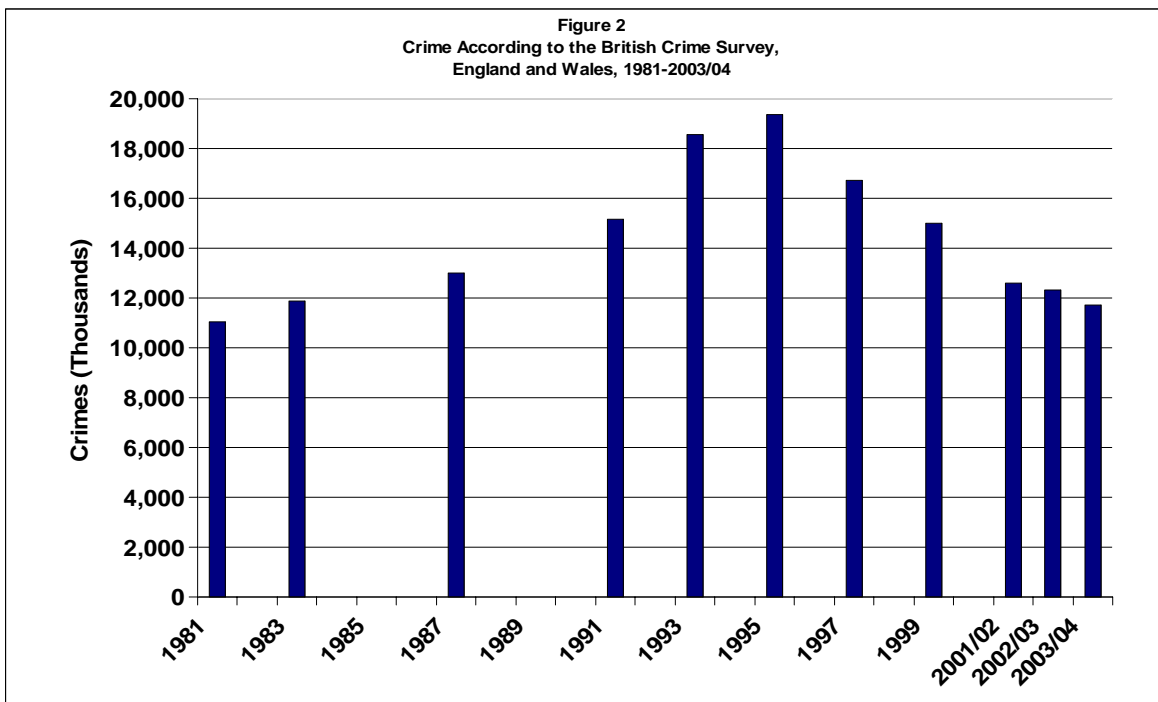
for a significant period which could be varied as under the former Borstal sentence. The detention and training order, the main custodial sentence that is applied after three convictions (fewer for serious offences) should be a minimum of 12 months and a maximum of four years, followed by intensive supervision for 12 months or more after release. Release after 12 months should depend on a prolonged period of demonstrated good behaviour.

Appendix 1



Source: Crime in England and Wales 2003/04. Home Office, 2004.

Note: Figures for 2002/03 onwards affected by the NCRS.



Source: Crime in England and Wales 2003/04.

Notes

¹ *Crime in England and Wales 2001/02*, p. 21.

² *Crime in England and Wales 2002/03*, p. 34.

³ *Crime in England and Wales 2001/02*, p. 21; and Povey, D. and Prime, J., *Recorded Crime Statistics England and Wales April 1998 to March 1999*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/99.

⁴ Home Office Research Study No. 206; Home Office Research Findings No. 161.

⁵ Home Office Research Findings 184.

⁶ *Crime in England and Wales 2003/04*, Table 2.04.

⁷ Edgar, K. and O'Donnell, I., *Mandatory Drug Testing in Prison*, Home Office Research Study 189, 1998.

⁸ Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts 2002-03.

⁹ Home Affairs Committee, *Rehabilitation of Prisoners*, January 2005, para 273.