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Rising crime

What should we do?



THE INDEPENDENT

1/ GET TOUGH

Many people blame the rise in crime on a trend to try to "understand" criminals. By explaining criminal behaviour, we are in danger of condoning it, they say.

Their answer is to get tough. Lock criminals away for longer periods to punish them, to protect society, to deter others, and to show our disapproval.

Many people believe

** The trend towards only cautioning petty offenders should be stopped.*

Last year, 216,000 people were cautioned.

Of those, 40 per cent had admitted crimes like burglary, robbery, indecent and violent assault.

** The use of bail should be restricted.*

Home Office statistics show that one in 10 people on bail commit further offences – that is, 50,000 crimes every year.

** The "get tough" approach should apply across the board – not only to murderers, rapists, and attackers, but also to the persistent thieves who cause so much misery to so many.*

Home Office statistics suggest that, every time a we lock a burglar away, we prevent him from committing between 3 and 13 further crimes.

And the argument for getting tough on criminals goes further than just more prison sentences.

** Prison itself should be a nastier experience, so as to deter offenders. For example, to make prisons "more austere"*

– The government is introducing new rules to allow greater use of isolation cells to punish prisoners who break rules.

– There will be more restrictions on home leave.

– Troublemakers will end up serving longer terms.

– And drug-testing will be introduced.

** Prisoners should not be able to while away their time at leisure, it is argued*

– they should be subject to rigorous regimes and training programmes.

– they should not have access to sporting and leisure facilities which law-abiding people can not afford outside prison.

And if conditions in some jails are grim – well, that is nothing more than criminals deserve.

BUT

Will these measures really halt the rise in crime? Or will they just make us all feel better, for having revenged ourselves on the criminals?

It is argued that

** Getting tough will have no effect at all on the crime rate. Prisons are just an expensive way of making bad people worse.*

Last year the government spent more than £1.6 billion on prisons. That's more than 100 times the amount spent on crime prevention.

** Britain is already at the top of the European league for jailing offenders. Our prisons, with a population of more than 47,000, are already bursting at the seams.*

** Recent Home Office research suggests that to achieve a drop of just 1% in the crime rate, you would have to increase the prison population by 25%. That would mean locking up 12,000 more people at an extra cost of £400m a year.*

The British Crime Survey said: "These figures underline the limitation of the formal criminal justice system as a mechanism for controlling crime and emphasise the need to look beyond it to other approaches."

It is further argued that

** Prisons should be reserved for serious and violent offenders. Property and petty offenders could face alternative penalties like community service. They might be put on probation, but made to attend treatment and therapy programmes. People maybe less likely to re-offend if they are treated rather than jailed.*

Last year, just over half of those put on probation and community service re-offended. But the figure for prisoners is nearer two-thirds.

For young men – who are responsible for most of the country's crime – the re-offending rate of those who have been in prison is around 80 per cent.

** Alternative penalties provide better value for money.*

It costs £150-a-week to hold someone in a bail hostel, compared with up to £566 a week in prison.

** Money spent on providing new jails would be better spent on prevention and detection, youth schemes and drug rehabilitation centres.*

1/ DRUGS

Some people think that drugs only hurt those who consume them, and their immediate circle. Others say that drugs are a big factor in the rise in crime.

Drug-taking is common among young people.

One in three men (33%) and almost one in four women (23%) aged between 16 to 29 told the British Crime Survey 1992 they had taken illegal drugs at some point.

Drugs are expensive.

Serious users of heroin, cocaine and crack can consume hundreds of pounds worth of their chosen drug a day,

Drugs create crime in several ways:

- * *Each time an illegal drug is bought or consumed there is a crime committed.*
- * *Users steal property and attack people to pay for their drugs.*
- * *Crimes of fraud and deception as well as violent crime are committed by the major drugs traffickers.*
- * *The massive proceeds support other criminal enterprises.*

The biggest area of crime caused by drugs is in the number of offences committed to raise money to buy them. Much of the recent rise in burglaries, robberies and car crime is directly linked to the increase in drugs consumption.

Police forces estimate that up to half of all property crime is drug-related.

People who want us to step up the fight against drugs as a way to reduce crime, say that

- * *We should continue enforcing the law and fighting to prevent the constant increase in drug use and availability.*
- * *Tougher penalties would deter dealers and users.*
- * *We already spend millions on drugs enforcement, prevention and rehabilitation and it will take more effort and resources before all the current measures take effect.*
- * *Substituting other crops in drug-growing countries needs more time to work.*

BUT

There is no shortage of drugs on the streets. Maybe we should accept that the battle has already been lost?

It is argued that the alternative is to decriminalise drugs, or to legalise them in a controlled way. Many advocates of this option are senior police officers and lawyers, who believe that the present strategy won't succeed.

Decriminalising cannabis would mean reducing penalties for possession of small amounts to the level of a fine for parking, or dropping litter.

Some countries have already done that:
in Holland, cannabis can be purchased
legally in cafes licensed by the Government.

Supporters say that

- It takes cannabis users away from the black market, so they will no longer come into contact with harder drugs.
- Violence and theft might diminish if we stopped trying to prevent drugs from getting to people who are determined to buy them.

Controlled legislation of harder drugs is a bigger step.

Supporters say that

- It would mean drug users no longer had to be associated with an illegal market, and that they would not then be associated with so many other crimes.
- It could also reduce crimes which are committed to raise money to buy drugs.

Complete decriminalisation means a government-licensed system of sale, with restriction on sales to young people, and in use in public places. Unlicensed trafficking could still remain illegal.

Opponents say that,

** It is a dangerous leap into the unknown. We may end up with more people using drugs than at present.*

** The risks of widespread drug consumption far outweigh the possible benefits. We may be in danger of unleashing on society a far greater problem for posterity than alcohol or cigarettes are now.*



1/ JUVENILE CRIME

Faced with an undoubted growth in juvenile crime, it is now argued that children found guilty should also be locked away.

Police officers complain that they are helpless to stop children joy riding, burgling and vandalising their neighbourhoods, because court powers are so limited when dealing with young people. No sooner are they arrested than they are back on the streets.

These young people, it is argued, know they are committing crime and creating mayhem. Writing off their offences in the hope of diverting children from the courts simply encourages their contempt.

New laws are proposed to tackle juvenile offenders:

** At present the minimum age for which children convicted of serious non-homicide offences (such as robbery or rape) can be jailed is 13. The proposal is to reduce that to 10 – with a maximum sentence of 14 years.*

** Persistent petty offenders aged 12 to 14 – joyriders and burglars – will be sent to new purpose-built “secure training schools” for between six months and two years.*

** Maximum sentences for 15-to 17-year-old non violent-offenders will be doubled to two years.*

BUT

Others argue that children and young people are too vulnerable to lock away. They are prone to bullying, intimidation, isolation from their families, despair and suicide.

The first two prison suicides this year were teenagers in a young offenders institution.

And, although juvenile crime is increasing, the numbers of known juvenile offenders is actually falling. That is because a small number of offenders can be responsible for a vast quantity of crime.

Between 1980 and 1990 the number of juvenile criminals dropped by 37%, from 175,800 to 110,9000.

And most of their crime is not particularly serious – 87% related to property crime, mostly theft and handling stolen goods. The killers of Jamie Bulger were shocking precisely because such crimes are rare.

Opponents say that existing laws are enough to deal with the relatively small numbers of serious juvenile offenders, by taking them into secure council homes. They say centres like the five new secure units that the Government is proposing to build, have been tried and tested before.

Willie Whitelaw’s “short sharp shock” – military-style borstal training – was a short-lived experiment for the simple reason that, as a policy, it affected neither the rate of crime, nor that of re-conviction.

Expeditions and trips are sometimes used as part of intensive therapy courses for persistent young offenders. But there have been reports that young people have re-offended within days of being taken on African safari or snorkelling in the Red Sea.

** Ministers want to limit the use of activity and adventure holidays for the treatment of juvenile offenders.*

** People who want a tougher approach say the children should be sweeping streets and cleaning up graffiti, not going on expensive holidays.*

BUT

Treatment centres say that,

** They have provided holidays for delinquent children as a last resort, when all else has failed.*

** The young offenders are often emotionally disturbed or suffering the effects of physical or sexual abuse – and that they are not simply being given a holiday.*

1/ SENTENCING

"No better than a lottery"

Take, for example, the case of the drunken driver who kills a woman and her daughter and is fined £250, or the young rapist who is placed on probation and ordered to pay for a £500 holiday for his victim.

Recent studies have shown that offenders receive different sentences, depending on where they live. For example,

Home Office research shows that rapists convicted in Yorkshire courts are twice as likely to receive a prison sentence of more than five years as those sentenced in the south-west.

Inconsistencies like that, it is argued,

** Undermine public confidence in the system.*

** They also weaken the deterrent effect of sentences, because justice is not seen to be done.*

It is suggested that a clearer range for sentences, that specify a maximum and a minimum penalty, would result in more consistency.

BUT opponents argue, no two crimes are identical. Judges and magistrates must be allowed to reflect the differences in crimes.

* * *

"Life . . ."

There is one crime for which judges are allowed no discretion. Murder carries an automatic life sentence.

BUT it is argued,

** The inflexibility of this sentence results in as much injustice as the flexibility of the penalties for other crimes.*

There is now a wide body of opinion which includes a House of Lords Committee and most of the judiciary, including the Lord Chief Justice, who say,

** The law should no longer treat a terrorist or hit man in exactly the same way as a battered wife driven to kill her husband, or a doctor or relative who helps in a mercy killing.*

British jails hold more than 3,000 lifers, more than all the other countries in western Europe put together.

* * *

"...or Death"

As well as changing the penalties for murder to enable the courts to reflect some mercy (say, in sentencing a battered wife who killed her husband) there are those who argue that the death penalty should be restored – perhaps for categories of killers such as terrorists, mass murderers or those who kill police.

They argue that,

** It is the ultimate deterrent and it reflects society's uncompromising attitude to the crime: it is the only just penalty for taking life.*

** Unlike a life sentence, the executed killer would never be freed to kill again.*

** And why should the taxpayer pay the huge costs – up to £560 a week – of incarcerating a killer for life?*

BUT

Britain has had a significant number of cases of serious miscarriages of justice. Many innocent people, like Timothy Evans, were wrongly sent to the gallows.

We also know that the Guildford Four, the Birmingham Six, Maguire Seven and Stephen Kiszko – all subsequently cleared of murder – might have been executed if Britain used capital punishment.

Their only pardon would have been posthumous. Also, opponents say the death penalty does not deter.

In Canada, homicide levels peaked just before the abolition of the death penalty and declined afterwards.

In the US, states with the death penalty have higher homicide levels. And the costs of endless appeals against death sentences are, some argue, as high as the cost of imprisoning someone for life.

1/ POLICE RESOURCES

Since 1979, spending on the police has risen from £1.4bn to £5.8bn. That is a real increase of more than 55 % – more than any other Government service. During the same period, the number of crimes committed has doubled – from 5 to 10 crimes for every 100 people in the country.

The total number of recorded crimes is now more than 5 million a year.

But, crime increases have not been matched by the number of people arrested, or the number charged. In spite of the rise in crime, the number of criminals being caught is actually diminishing.

Why aren't the police solving more crimes?

Senior police officers say

** It's due to a combination of rising crime, and other burdens such as increased paper work.*

** New laws, such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, have changed the way they have to work, making police work more difficult.*

Wider social changes have also had their effect.

** The number of vehicles on the roads has risen from 18 million in 1979 to almost 25 million in 1992, an increase of more than a third.*

** The number of homeless families has nearly trebled, from 57,000 in 1979 to 148,000 in 1992.*

** The policy of caring for people in the community has increased the numbers of mentally disturbed people on the streets.*

** New age travellers are a new phenomenon.*

Chief constables want more officers and more money to cope with the increased burden.

** Compared to the rise in crime, the number of police officers has risen from 113,000 in 1979 to only 128,000 at present.*

** And, around 80 % of the extra money has gone simply to ensure that police salaries keep pace with inflation.*

A series of studies by the Government has shown that the police do not use their existing resources effectively, and that there is scope for improved efficiency.

It is agreed that the problem is in part due to police finances being too rigidly controlled. The Government says it has introduced legislation to solve that problem.

But ministers have refused to give the police more money: extra front line officers must be paid for by improved efficiency.

Many people see "more bobbies on the beat" as the answer to rising crime

BUT

- * *Studies show that officers on patrol rarely come across individual crimes.*
- * *Patrolling is only one part of front line police duty.*
- * *Rather than attempting to investigate every reported crime, police have started targeting specific, known criminals, such as habitual burglars.*

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Even in forces where arrest rates have increased, fewer people end up being charged.

Barry Irving, of the independent research body, the Police Foundation, says this means police officers are being "highly active" in response to rising crime, but "less effective" in actually finding enough evidence to prosecute those arrested.

This may be due to the fact that police have been encouraged to use cautioning in more and more cases.

According to the shadow Attorney General, the Crown Prosecution service has instructed the police to drop up to 78% of cases in the last five years, only 32% of these due to insufficient evidence.

The fall in Crown Court cases, it is believed, has been actively encouraged by the Government's requirement to reduce spending.

1/ THE RIGHT TO SILENCE

**" You do not have to say anything unless you wish to do so,
but anything you do say may be given in evidence."**

As the words of the well-known police caution make plain, anyone suspected of committing a crime does not have to say anything in their defence. Nor are judges allowed to comment on that decision to remain silent when summing up for juries.

A Royal Commission, set up in the light of the widely publicised cases of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four, recommended keeping the right to silence. It warned that its abolition could lead to more miscarriages of justice.

Pressure to change this rule comes mostly from police, who say that,

** A disproportionate number of those who exercise the "right to silence" are professional criminals and are highly capable of manipulating the law to suit their own purposes.*

** Innocent people are always anxious to account for their actions.*

The Government also wants to change the rule. It is proposing that,

** Judges be allowed to tell juries that a defendant said nothing at the time of arrest, or during police questioning. A judge might then suggest that a defendant only contrived his or her defence later.*

** Judges should be able to draw the jury's attention to the fact that, for instance, a defendant was arrested in the street outside a burglary but was unable to give an innocent explanation for his presence.*

** But, prosecutions should not be allowed where a suspect's silence was the only apparent evidence against them.*

BUT

Those in favour of keeping the right to silence say that,

** The police would be able to put unfair pressure on vulnerable, innocent people to say things which will incriminate them.*

** Some innocent people might have good reasons for wanting to stay silent.*

** Clearly, judges commenting on a suspect's silence could influence the jury's decision.*

** They add that professional criminals will continue to remain silent under questioning and take their chance in court.*

** And that change would undermine one of the fundamental principles of the British legal system:*

that a person is presumed innocent
until the prosecution prove otherwise.
That right dates back for many centuries.

2/ THE RIGHT TO TRIAL BY JURY

At present, defendants have the right to a trial by jury in those cases which can be dealt with either by magistrates, or by a judge and jury.

Magistrates deal with 1.4 million cases a year compared with 100,000 in the Crown Court. Some 35,000 of these are referred to the Crown Court on the insistence of defendants.

A Royal Commission recommended abolishing that right in many cases, depending on the gravity of offence, the defendant's past record, the complexity of case and likely effect of sentence on the defendant; his or her potential loss of reputation would be a factor.

The most serious offences would remain triable by a jury. But, under the proposals, a large number of smaller thefts, minor deceptions and other offences would only be dealt with by magistrates.

Those who favour abolition say that,

** Crown Court cases are expensive and often time-wasting.*

Contested cases cost on average £12,000. And removal to the magistrates' court would help to reduce the 4 month waiting period that defendants pleading not guilty have to wait between the initial hearing and final trial.

** 70% of those who elect trial by jury eventually plead guilty on all counts – the majority are given sentences which could have been imposed by the magistrates.*

** The jury system is flawed: active members of the community tend to find reasons to get out of doing jury service biasing juries towards the retired, middle-class women and the unemployed. In research studies, only 56% said they sat on a jury where all members had understood the evidence.*

BUT

Those against abolition say that,

** The right to trial by jury has been the foundation stone of freedom and justice in this country for hundreds of years and that its abolition would erode the rights of innocent people.*

** This is purely a cost-cutting exercise at the expense of justice.*

** Magistrates, who have a closer working relationship with the police than ordinary members of the public, are more likely to believe their version of events.*

** Jury trials would only be granted to those whom magistrates thought had a reputation to lose – in effect one law for the rich another for the poor.*

1/ BETTER PREVENTION

Crime can be reduced by making it more difficult to commit. The police call it "target hardening".

As crime has risen, so has the public's determination to do something about protecting themselves. At the same time, police forces can no longer afford to patrol areas which only suffer from a moderate crime problem.

One way of filling the gap is Neighbourhood Watch.

A Watch is where people living in a clearly defined area, such as a street, or block of flats, agree to keep watch on each others' homes, and on the general locality, reporting any possible crimes or suspicious activity to the police. Co-ordinators liaise with the police.

The first Watches began in 1982. There are now an estimated 90,000 schemes, covering more than three million households. A number of similar ideas, such as Pub Watch, Shop Watch and Factory Watch have followed.

Supporters of Watch schemes say that they do prevent crime. They also help create a sense of security and community, and they help provide police with information.

* * *

We are also becoming more aware of how physical security, landscape, and building design, can affect crime.

- * *More homes have window locks and alarms than ever before.*
- * *New housing estates are built with security in mind: to avoid having, for example, darkened subways.*
- * *Local councils are encouraged to improve lighting in streets and car parks.*
- * *Insurance companies charge lower premiums to people who take crime prevention measures.*

* * *

Many people have come to feel that the police are powerless to protect them, so they need to protect themselves.

Some Neighbourhood Watch schemes have gone further, and begun their own local night time patrols among their own communities, designed to deter criminals.

Some local councils pay for private security patrols for crime ridden estates, because they say the police presence is insufficient.

One council, in County Durham, has set up its own uniformed "community force" led by a retired police officer.

BUT

Should people be forced to spend more of their own time and money on anti-crime measures? After all, they already pay their taxes, which pay for the police.

Also, it is impossible to say how much crime is prevented by such schemes.

Critics of such schemes say that,

** Criminals simply move to a nearby area, and that prevention schemes simply place an additional load on the police.*

** At their worst, they present an ideal opportunity for nosey busy bodies to spy on their neighbours.*

There are worrying aspects.

** Unscrupulous alarm companies prosper.*

** Security cameras in shopping centres and on the fringes of public buildings invade our privacy.*

** High streets have turned into echoing alleyways of shuttered shops.*

Do people have the right to mount their own patrols, or to take the law into their own hands? They might not stop at deterrence.

In Norfolk last year, two men were jailed for five years after kidnapping and threatening a local 17-year-old youth whom they suspected of involvement in crime.

It is said that, these developments illustrate the underfunding of the police. The Government should ensure that there are enough police to make sure that vigilantes are not necessary.

Police officers themselves face a dilemma:

** While they do not wish to discourage public vigilance, they are worried about untrained and inexperienced people attempting to tackle dangerous criminals.*

** And they fear that further violence will be provoked by those who seek revenge upon criminals.*

1/ ATTACKING THE ROOTS

"This isn't a policing problem. It's a social problem."

So concludes a seasoned officer, responsible for policing an inner city estate in Newcastle, where crime is so rampant no residents can obtain insurance.

Six out of ten men on that estate are out of work. There is malnutrition, high infant mortality, poor physical and mental health, low achievement among children in schools, and a lot of family breakdown.

And many people agree with the estate officer that a large proportion of crime has its roots in poverty and unemployment.

David Dickinson, a Cambridge economist, found that the growing number of burglaries tracked the growing unemployment figures almost exactly during the Eighties.

Young men were most affected by unemployment – and they in turn account for most crime.

Men between the ages of 17 and 25 account for almost 70 per cent of adult convictions and cautions for burglary. And unemployment is twice as high among men under 25 as it is among older men.

Another Cambridge study, based on 400 boys born in 1953, found delinquent youths were more likely to have come from low income and larger families, lived in run down housing, and experienced either parental conflict or family breakdown before the age of 10. They were also more likely to have had family members with a criminal past and to have been aggressive or troublesome at school.

And, their poor education, poor communication skills and suspicion of "authority" makes it hard for them to use the help that is available to them. Racism is also cited as a cause of rising crime and racially-provoked attack is on the increase.

Police officials estimate there are around 130,000 racial incidents of criminal victimisation every year, 25% of which involve assault.

But, it is claimed that,

** Banning racist organisations, who are often blamed for inciting racial violence, would only drive them further underground and add urgency to their cause.*

Some people think that some of the millions spent on prisons should be spent on youth services, and on drug rehabilitation centres. Others (and the Government has toyed with this idea) think children who are at a high risk should be targeted for help and education from a very low age.

BUT

Against all this is the fact that most poor people do not resort to crime. And crime rose steadily during the Fifties and Sixties, when we had full employment.

Also, because the rate of increase in recorded crime has slowed down since its peak in mid-1991, some people believe that the crime rate will continue to ease as the economy picks up.

Home Office research has shown that, as buying slowed down during the Eighties recession, property crime rose. During the late Eighties boom, there was an increase in violent crimes (which are often linked with alcohol). During the boom, property crime fell.

Critics also say it's naive to believe that vast spending on social welfare will reform hardened criminals.

** They say the effects would not be felt for at least a generation – maybe two.*

** And there is no evidence that such investment would work.*

** They say, we risk letting offenders off the hook and giving them an excuse for unacceptable behaviour which damages the very fabric of society.*

Crime is such a pressing problem that action is needed immediately.

1/ THE MORAL CLIMATE

The Family:

Poor parenting, single mothers, and a collective failure to instil a sense of right from wrong, have all have been blamed for the behaviour of young offenders.

Certainly the family has changed. According to Government statistics,

Since 1971, marriages have fallen by a fifth whilst the number of divorces has doubled. In 1991, nearly one third of all registered births were outside marriage. The number of lone parent families has more than doubled, from 8% in 1971 to 18% in 1991.

People say that

** We should look at countries like Japan, or Switzerland, where greater social conformity seems to go hand-in-hand with lower crime rates.*

** Sixties morality has undermined respect for authority, leading to lax attitudes towards the law. Traditional and religious values are being eroded along with the family.*

BUT

Others say those social changes need not create a generation of delinquents. They argue

** Society has changed, and we must learn to cope with the change.*

** Extra pressure is placed on single parents. They are far more likely to be living in poverty. But the majority of children born outside marriage are born into stable relationships.*

In 1991, three quarters of all births outside marriage were registered by both parents, half of whom were living at the same address.

** Instead of penalising families, money should be spent on teaching parenting skills, providing child care facilities for single parents at work, and centres for young people.*

* * *

Education:

People say that

** Schools should teach the traditional values. Children should wear uniforms. Teachers should establish authority, and punish children firmly when they do wrong.*

BUT

It is argued that

** Children's experience is changing, and schools should be supportive of that change. The emphasis should be on improving nursery school education for children from disrupted families, to give them a better chance of succeeding at school.*

The Media:

The media is often blamed for undermining moral standards. It is argued that children, particularly those who grow up in families with no moulding influence, rely on outside stimulation to guide their behaviour.

** Video nasties and pornography have been cited in court as a trigger for violent crime – for example, the film "Child's Play" in the case of Jamie Bulger, the two-year-old killed by two 11-year-olds. Stanley Kubrick has refused to re-release "Clockwork Orange", following reports that gangs of youths had acted out vicious scenes from the film.*

That argument is sometimes extended to television news. People say that,

** Crime and disaster dominates bulletins, leading children to believe that violence is common.*

Advertisers are also blamed. People argue,

** We live in a go-getting society, designed for and catering to successful people.*

** Advertising tells us what to want, how to live, and how to look. All of which places greater pressure on less advantaged young people. For someone with little hope of a job and little stake in society, crime may seem the easiest way to get those things.*

BUT

The Government says that,

** Britain already has the tightest controls on video nasties in Europe, and they cannot see a way of making them stronger.*

Researchers say there is no proof of links between screen violence and crime.

More than 1,000 pieces of research have been commissioned, making it one of the most heavily studied questions in mass communications. None can provide a firm conclusion about whether screen violence breeds real-life violence.

In fact, the research suggests that there is far less violence on British screens than elsewhere in the West.

And others add,

** Further controls on the media would infringe all our rights – to the freedom of self-expression and information.*