

Jury still out on Labour's crime promise

Government's record is less successful than official figures would have us believe

Labour's ambition to overhaul the criminal justice system has certainly been very high. Since 2001 there have been four criminal justice plans and no agency has been left untouched by the government's reforming zeal. There has also been substantial extra investment – this financial year the budget for the criminal justice system is a third larger than it was ten years ago. Spending on law and order now accounts for 2.5 per cent of GDP, the largest ever proportion, and the UK spends proportionately more than any other country in the OECD.

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So what has this all achieved? Well, on the face of it, the government's record has been impressive, with many targets being met. Police numbers have gone up, the time between arrest and sentence for young offenders has been cut dramatically, the number of drug users entering treatment has increased, more offences are being "brought to justice" and crime as measured by the British Crime Survey – known as the BCS – has fallen by 35 per cent since 1997.

However, a closer scrutiny of the evidence suggests success has been far less clear-cut

than the government tends to claim. This is demonstrated by the record on crime reduction, offences brought to justice and re-offending rates

On crime levels there are questions about Labour's impact on crime and whether overall total crime is really in decline. BCS-measured crime started declining before Labour entered office in 1997, following a record high in 1995. It fell by 22 per cent during Labour's first term, when increases in expenditure were checked by Treasury commitments to Tory spending limits.

The current target to reduce it further by 15 per cent in the five years to 2007-08, which is more or less on course to be met, is therefore relatively unambitious, especially given that this target coincided with the period when criminal justice spending increased. It is reasonable, therefore, to ask what exactly Labour achieved for the major investment it has made in the criminal justice system.

It is also important to recognise that the British Crime Survey ignores many serious crimes such as childhood sexual or physical abuse, which undermines the significance of the target being met. Furthermore, the underlying trend in the rise in homicides since 1997 raises serious questions about Labour's claims to have improved public safety.

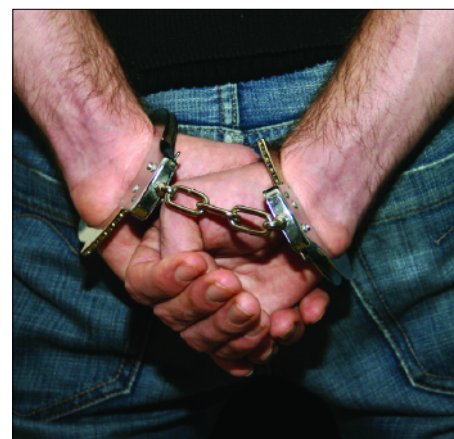
A key area of activity has centred on narrowing "the justice gap". The Home Office has sought to ensure that more offences are dealt with by formal sanction

– increasing the number of suspected offences that result in an individual being cautioned, convicted or otherwise sanctioned, known as "offences brought to justice". The government has met its target, most recently with more than 1.25 million offences brought to justice well ahead of the 2007-08 deadline.

However, the target has not been met as a result of increases in successful convictions, but through increased cautions, penalty notices for disorder and formal warnings for cannabis possession. As a proportion of the total number of offences brought to justice, successful convictions have actually fallen, from 69 per cent in 2003 to 49 per cent last year. What's more, overall, despite the drive to narrow the justice gap, there are only three convictions for every 100 estimated crimes.

On re-offending, the government has set several targets since 1997 that have all have been modified, missed or dropped, with overall re-offending rates increasing. This is one of Labour's most conspicuous criminal justice failures. It has also chosen to use reconvictions as a proxy measure of re-offending, resulting in confusion and a lack of clarity over definitions and targets.

In reality the government's record is mixed. Despite great investment there has been no significant step change in outcomes and questions remain about whether the government is placing too much emphasis on finding criminal justice solutions to complex social and economic problems. ■



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